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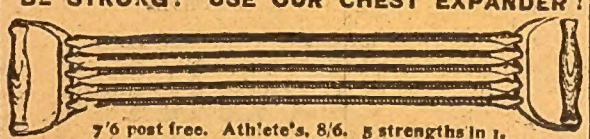

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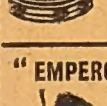

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SHORT STORIES.

No. 647.] For the Week Ending May 25th, 1901. [ONE PENNY.

At the Eleventh Hour.

He reeled as though he had been struck. For one brief instant he regarded Nora and her companion with a stare of horrified incredulity.

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AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

CHAPTER I.

A Bitter Awakening.

"I will not pretend that this comes as a surprise to me, Mr. Meredith. To be perfectly frank with you, I have been expecting this visit for several days and so far as I have any influence with Nora, it shall be used on your behalf."

The scene was an elegantly furnished drawing-room in a picturesque old house in Bundoran, a little watering-place on the west coast of Ireland.

The speaker was Mrs. Carew, a middle-aged woman, clad in the sombre garb of a newly-made widow; and the person she addressed was a young English artist named Adrian Meredith, who had made a practice for the last half-dozen years of spending a considerable portion of the summer in the neighbourhood of Bundoran, and who, in the year of which we write, had arrived there exactly a fortnight before our story opens.

"I am delighted to find that I can count on your goodwill and sympathy," he replied. "I feared that you might resent my request, seeing that Miss Carew's father has only been dead three months; and I was also afraid, if I must confess the truth, that you would think I had scarcely known your daughter long enough to warrant me in asking her to be my wife."

"You have certainly seen very little of each other," assented Mrs. Carew. "Though you have been a regular visitor to Bundoran, this is the first year, I believe, that you and she have met."

"That is so," he said. "I can only suppose that I must have been blind in former years! Anyhow, I have seen her now, and I am sufficiently cognizant of my own feelings to know that my whole life's happiness depends upon the answer which she gives to the question which I am about to put to her."

"Which is a hint, I suppose, that you are impatient for me to send her in to you!" said Mrs. Carew. "Before I do so, however, there is something which I think I ought to tell you. You spoke just now of the late Mr. Carew as Nora's father and of myself as her mother."

"Oh, well, of course I know that you are really a stepmother," he explained.

"No, I am not even that," she answered. "Neither was Mr. Carew her father. She was washed ashore during a terrible storm about nineteen years ago and to this day nobody knows who her parents were. At that time, as you doubtless know, Mr. Carew was rector of Bundoran, and he and his wife adopted the foundling and christened her Nora. When she was twelve years of age the first Mrs. Carew died and five years later the rector married me. He died, as you know, a little over three months ago, and his death has left me in such straitened circumstances that it will be quite impossible for me to give Nora anything in the shape of a dowry."

Adrian Meredith glanced significantly round the expensively furnished drawing-room before he replied, and then he said:

"Believe me, Mrs. Carew, you do me a serious injustice if you imagine that I have ever thought of money in connection with Miss Carew. It is a matter of the utmost indifference to me who her parents were, or how much money she possesses. So long as I can gain her love my heart's desire will be fulfilled."

"Then there is another matter to which I must refer, in order to put you on your guard," continued Mrs. Carew. "You have heard of Lord Fedamore no doubt. He lives at Castle Fedamore, about two miles from Bundoran. He is a typical example of a bankrupt Irish peer, and is rapidly drinking himself into his grave.

"His eldest son, and consequently the heir to the title and the heavily-mortgaged estate, is the Honourable Mervyn Blake who is at present travelling in Russia as the representative of a wealthy English syndicate. He and Nora have known each other ever since they were children together, and the silly girl has got it into her head that Mervyn Blake is in love with her! Of course, I have all along pointed out to her that it was ridiculous to suppose that he, whose only hope of financial salvation lies in marrying a wealthy heiress, would marry a penniless orphan like Nora, and recent events have gone far to prove that I was right."

"And may I venture to ask what those events are?" asked Meredith.

"Certainly. You have every right to know," she replied. "Up to the time of the rector's death, Nora and Mervyn had written to each other almost every day, and as a matter of course she wrote to inform him of the loss she had sustained. For reasons best known to himself, he never answered her letter, and although three months have now elapsed she has never received a single line from him since. What construction she places on his silence I do not know, but for my part I think the explanation is simplicity itself. He has evidently succeeded in capturing some grand lady of the Russian world, and consequently he now desires to put an end to the harmless flirtation of his boyish days. Don't you think that is a very probable explanation?"

He replied in the affirmative, and a few minutes later she departed in search of Nora.

It must here be explained that the second Mrs. Carew, unlike the first, had always looked upon Nora as an alien and a stranger. Her selfish, grasping nature had grudged every penny that Mr. Carew had expended on his adopted daughter; but so long as the worthy rector had been alive she had never dared to make open protest. When he died, however, she mentally resolved that she would get rid of the girl as soon as she could invent a pretext for doing so, and Adrian Meredith's proposal seemed to her to afford her the very opportunity for which she was waiting.

"Mr. Meredith wishes to speak with you in the drawing-room," she said.

"With me?" said Nora.

"Yes, with you!" said Mrs. Carew sharply. "You need not pretend to be surprised by the announcement!"

"I am not pretending," said Nora with quiet dignity. "I have given Mr. Meredith such unmistakable hints that his attentions are distasteful to me that I am both pained and surprised that he should persist in annoying me. I shall certainly decline to see him!"

"You will do nothing of the kind!" retorted Mrs.

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Carew. "Are you aware that he has come to ask you to be his wife?"

"I guessed as much!" said Nora.

"Then kindly understand that I insist upon you accepting him!" said Mrs. Carew. "Whatever claims you may have had on my husband, you have none on me, and it would be unreasonable to expect me to support you any longer. I have been willing to provide for you until you found a husband, and if you refuse Mr. Meredith's offer of marriage I shall consider my obligation at an end, and shall repudiate all further responsibility for your future welfare!"

"I had no suspicion until this moment that you regarded me in the light of an unwelcome dependant," answered Nora. "Now that I know the truth I assure you that I will not burden you with my presence an hour longer than is absolutely necessary!"

"We are not taking part in an Adelphi melodrama!" said Mrs. Carew. "We are discussing a matter that concerns your future welfare, and there is not the slightest necessity for either of us to lose our tempers, or indulge in heroics! All I wish to point out is that you are now of an age when I have every right to expect you to relieve me of the burden of your support. If Mr. Carew had been a sensible man he would have given you such an education as would have fitted you to earn your own livelihood, but seeing that he chose to bring you up as a young lady of fortune your only hope of providing for your future is to marry someone with a decent income. As for Mervyn Blake, you may as well dismiss all thought of him from your mind. He has evidently realized the necessity of marrying money, and I, for one, do not blame him!"

"That is a question which I do not choose to discuss with you!" said Nora. "If it is your desire that I should see Mr. Meredith I will do so, but it will only be wasting time!"

"Nevertheless, it is certainly my wish that you should see him," said Mrs. Carew. "You will find him waiting for you in the drawing-room, and I trust you will see the advisability of giving him the answer he desires."

He rose when she entered the drawing-room, and made her a sweeping bow.

"Good afternoon, Miss Carew," he said, "Mrs. Carew has doubtless told you——"

"Yes, she has told me everything," she interrupted. "I had hoped that my attitude towards you during the past fortnight would have shown you that it is utterly impossible that there can ever be any closer bond between us than that of mere acquaintanceship. I cannot believe that I have failed to make this clear to you, and I trust therefore, that you will allow the matter to rest where it stands at present, and not compel me to express my sentiments in more definite terms."

"It is impossible for me to accept your suggestion," he exclaimed, suddenly catching her hand and holding it in spite of her protests. "To relinquish my suit in the spiritless fashion you suggest would be to cast a grave reflection on the depth of the love I bear towards you! I am aware that you have done your best to discourage me, but my love is proof against all rebuffs and is bound to triumph in the end. You may not love me now, but when you have cast the image of Mervyn Blake out of your heart——"

"Enough!" she cried, snatching away her hand and confronting him with blazing eyes. "I forbid you to drag Mr. Blake's name into the discussion!"

"I am sorry to disregard your prohibition," he answered calmly. "I would willingly spare you the anguish of the revelation I am about to make, but it would be cowardly on my part and unjust to you to leave you in ignorance of Mr. Blake's real character.

"Mr. Blake, as you know, has been in Russia for several months and I hear from Mrs. Carew that he has lately ceased to write to you. You have doubtless indulged in a good many speculations as to the reason of his sudden coldness, but I doubt if you have ever, even in your most despondent moments, imagined him to be guilty of such baseness as he has actually displayed."

He drew a copy of the London DAILY TELEGRAPH from his pocket and was holding it out towards her.

"Read that," he said, pointing to a paragraph on the fifth page.

She took the paper from his hand and allowed her eyes to wander over the paragraph he had pointed out. And this is what she read:

"On Tuesday last, at the Church of the Transfiguration in St. Petersburg, the Hon. Mervyn Blake, only son of Lord Fedamore, of Castle Fedamore, Co. Donegal, Ireland, was married, according to the Greek rites, to the Princess Olga Dianovitch, only daughter and heiress of the late Prince Dianovitch. We understand that the happy couple have already left the Russian capital *en route* for Ireland, where the honeymoon will be spent."

It was a bitter blow, and it says much for Nora's pride that she bore it without flinching. Though her heart was well-nigh breaking she scorned to let Adrian Meredith see the anguish she was suffering, and there was scarcely a tremor in her voice as she handed back the paper with an unemotional "Thank you."

"Well, what do you think of Mervyn Blake now?" he asked.

"I am not aware that my opinion of Mr. Blake is a matter in which you have any concern," she answered.

Her calmness completely upset his calculations, and before he had recovered his wonted composure the housemaid appeared to show him to the door.

"You have not seen the last of me," he whispered to Nora. "I will give you until to-morrow afternoon to think over what I have told you, and then I will call again."

She made no reply, for her self-command was almost exhausted, and she dared not trust herself to speak lest her agony should betray itself. Pale, proud, and silent, she watched him across the room; but as soon as the door had closed behind him her overstrained nerves gave way, and she burst into a flood of scalding tears.

CHAPTER II.

THE FLIGHT.

SCARCELY had Adrian Meredith taken his departure ere Nora heard Mrs. Carew approaching the drawing-room with the object, no doubt, of learning the result of the interview. As her stepmother was the last person in the world whom she desired to see just then, she made her escape by another door, hurried upstairs and locked herself in her bedroom.

Here she flung herself on the bed and abandoned herself to unrestrained grief. It was quite true, as Mrs. Carew had said, that she and Mervyn Blake had known each other from childhood. It was Mervyn who taught her to fish, to ride, and to row. When he had left Bundoran and had gone to college, it was to Nora that his longest letters had been written, and it was with Nora—his "little sweetheart" as he had called her

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—that the greater part of his holidays had been spent.

After leaving college he had gone to London in order to qualify as an electrical engineer; but all its gaieties had proved unequal to the task of effacing the memory of his "little sweetheart" from his thoughts, and whenever the opportunity had presented itself he had hurried over to Bundoran in order to gladden himself with the sight of her winsome face.

How often, on such occasions, had they discussed the future together. And in all his talk it had always been "we," and never "I." It had never entered his head to ask her if she would be his wife, just as it had never entered hers to wonder whether he would marry her. They had both taken *that* for granted, and when he had accepted the appointment under the London syndicate, and had gone abroad, it had been a well-understood thing between them that when he returned he would claim her as his bride.

* * * * *

And now the dream was over! Mervyn was married—married to a Russian princess—and was even now on his way to Ireland. At all costs she must quit Bundoran before he arrived with the woman who had supplanted her.

"I am bound to go away in any case," she muttered to herself. "After what Mrs. Carew said to me this afternoon it is impossible for me to remain under this roof another night. Where shall I go? It must be somewhere where I am not known, somewhere where it will not be difficult for me to find employment."

"London!" she exclaimed. "The very place! No one will think of looking for me there. I will go to London!"

She had a few pounds in her pocket and a couple of bank-notes in her writing-case. She had also several articles of jewellery which had been given to her at various times by her adopted parents; and these, together with a handbag containing some sleeping apparel and toilet requisites, were all she decided to take with her. To have encumbered herself with luggage would have necessitated a car, and this would have been fatal to the object she had most at heart, which was to slip away without attracting attention and without leaving any clue by which she could afterwards be traced.

Whilst she was changing her afternoon dress for a less conspicious travelling costume she was disturbed by a knock at the bedroom door.

"Who's there?" she called.

"It is I," replied the voice of Mrs. Carew. "I wish to have a few words with you. I have something important to communicate.

Nora made no reply, nor did she open the door, and after a pause Mrs. Carew exclaimed:

"If you choose to be sulky it is no concern of mine, but I thought you would like to know that I have just heard from the new rector that Mervyn Blake is married and is expected at the Castle to-morrow!"

Still Nora vouchsafed no answer, and a few seconds later she had the satisfaction of hearing her stepmother go downstairs again.

It was now nearly five o'clock. The last train from Bundoran left at thirteen minutes past, and as the station was half-a-mile away, she decided it was time she was going. Having drawn down her veil, so as to conceal her face, she cautiously unlocked the bedroom door and stole downstairs. Mrs. Carew was entertaining a visitor in the drawing-room whilst the servants were engaged in the back of the house, and by slipping into the dining-room and stepping through the French window she managed to gain the road without attracting observation.

Upon reaching the station she took a ticket for Clones, and ten minutes later she found herself alone in a third-class compartment with the familiar objects of her girlhood's days receding into the distance as the train bore her swiftly away.

She tried not to think of Mervyn Blake, and with the object of diverting her thoughts from him she took up a paper which someone had left on the carriage seat. It was a low-class Society paper, published in London, and the first paragraph that caught her was this:

"Let no one say that the modern son is ungrateful! A week ago that titled dypsomaniac, Lord F——, was in the unhappy position of not being able to raise the price of a drink by reason of the fact that his ancestral acres were mortgaged up to the hilt. Fortunately for his lordship, he not only possessed an unquenchable thirst, but also an obliging son, and the latter has nobly come to the rescue by marrying a Russian Princess whose fortune is variously estimated at from six to eight million roubles. As soon as this fact became known to the Jews, the value of Lord F——'s time-honoured signature went up by leaps and bounds, and to-day he is the happiest, and probably the most intoxicated, peer in the United Kingdom!"

She flung the paper from her as though it had been a venomous reptile. It seemed as if the Fates had decreed that her misery should dog her wherever she went. She strove to dismiss the paragraph from her mind, but its brutal phrases haunted her, and by the time she reached Clones she was well-nigh spent by the mental struggles through which she had passed.

After a sleepless night at one of the hotels, she resumed her journey next morning, and arrived in Dublin at a quarter to eleven. As it was impossible for her to leave for England until evening, she determined to employ the interval in selling some of her jewellery, and for this purpose she made her way to a jeweller's shop in Grafton Street.

"You purchase second-hand jewellery, I believe?" she said to the attendant who came forward to serve her.

"Yes, madam," he replied. "Have you some to dispose of?"

"I have a few things here I should like to sell," she answered, opening her bag; but he hastened to explain that he was not empowered to deal with such matters himself.

"You will have to see Mr. Dillon," he said, referring to the proprietor of the shop. "He is engaged at present with some customers in his private room, but I don't think he will be long."

He had scarcely spoken ere the door of the inner room opened and Mr. Dillon came out.

"Reach me that set of opal studs and sleeve-links out of the window," he said to his assistant.

While the assistant was complying with this request Nora carelessly glanced through the half-open door of the inner room, and to her unspeakable dismay she perceived that the "customers" were Mervyn Blake and a handsome young lady of foreign appearance.

"I don't think I would like to give my husband opals, Mr. Dillon," she said, speaking with a pretty foreign accent. "They are unlucky, you know! Show me some diamond studs instead."

"Certainly, your highness," replied the proprietor;

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and a few moments later he disappeared into the room again with the articles for which she had asked.

"That's the Princess Olga Dianovitch," began the assistant, addressing Nora, and then he paused, alarmed by the ghastly whiteness of her face.

"Are you ill, madam?" he asked.

"I—I am not very well," stammered Nora. "I—I think I will call later, when Mr. Dillon is disengaged," and picking up her bag, she groped her way to the door and staggered out into the busy street.

CHAPTER III.

An Unexpected Meeting.

"There, that will do for to-day, thank you, Miss Bryce."

The speaker was a Royal Academician, and the "model" was—Nora Carew!

Upon reaching London she had found that her dreams of speedy employment were doomed to be rudely dispelled. She had answered dozens of advertisements and

"Enough," she cried. "I forbid you to drag Mr. Blake's name into the discussion."

had tramped some scores of miles, but the result had always been the same, and she had crept back to her dingy lodgings broken-hearted and dispirited. Little by little her slender store of money had melted away, and at last, in sheer despair, she had taken her landlady's oft-repeated advice and had sought employment as an artist's model.

Her faultless figure and her sweet, sad face—beautiful still, in spite of the famished expression which it now habitually wore—secured her an immediate engagement; but the pay was miserably poor, and on the day of which we write she had not yet broken her fast although it was then six o'clock in the evening.

"I shall want you again to-morrow," said her patron. "I should also like you to come a little earlier if you can manage it—but perhaps your other engagements will not permit of this."

"I have no other engagements," she answered sadly. "I can come as early as you wish."

"Then please be here by nine o'clock," he said. "I will arrange with my wife to give you some dinner in the middle of the day."

She thanked him and took her departure. As she closed the studio door behind her she was horrified to find herself face to face with Adrian Meredith, who was evidently coming to pay his fellow artist a visit. She tried to slip past him before he recognised her, but the Fates were against her, and with a low cry of exultant surprise he darted after her and caught her by the arm.

"So I have found you at last, little runaway!" he said.

"Let me go!" she panted, struggling to free herself from his grasp. "Why do you seek to detain me? Let me go!"

"I won't force myself upon you," he said in injured tones. "I had hoped that my constancy would have secured me a kindlier reception at your hands, but it seems I was mistaken. I, only, of all your former friends, have made any attempt to discover your whereabouts. And now that I have found you, you spurn me as though I were your bitterest foe!"

He turned away his head as if to hide his emotion, and something suspiciously like a sob burst from his lips. It was only a clever piece of acting, but it served his purpose, and Nora at once became contrite and self-reproachful.

"I am sorry I spoke harshly to you, Mr. Meredith," she said, timidly laying her hand on his arm. "I did not mean to hurt your feelings. Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you! There is nothing to forgive!" he answered, with a wistful smile. "You are the queen of my heart, and the queen, you know, can do no wrong. But enough of that. We are friends now, aren't we?"

She nodded her head, and then she held out her hand for the purpose of bidding him adieu.

He took her hand, but instead of letting it go again he drew it through his arm and commenced to walk down the road.

"This is not a time for conventional scruples," he said. "Anyone with half an eye can see that you are starving and I am going to insist upon you accepting my invitation to dinner!"

"Oh no——!" she began.

"Oh yes!" he interrupted firmly. "I am going to take you to the Criterion Restaurant and I'm not going to ask you a single question, or try to exact a single promise from you, until you have dined! After that, if you choose to confide your troubles to me I shall be proud to receive your confidences, but if you prefer to leave me in ignorance of what you have been doing, or where you are living, I shall make no attempt to find out. In a word, it shall depend entirely upon yourself whether we meet again or whether we part to-night for ever."

Again he was only acting—for he had not the slightest intention of losing sight of her now that he had found her; but again Nora was deceived into believing him, and her eyes brimmed over with grateful tears.

"Well, is it agreed that we go to the Criterion?" asked Meredith.

"I am reluctant to accept your invitation lest I should seem to be encouraging hopes which can never be realized," she replied.

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"That is unkind," he answered, gravely. "I am not a saint, but I trust I am too much of a gentleman to try to take advantage of your misfortune in order to press my suit upon you Have I not told you that if it is your desire that we should never meet again after to-night I will respect your wishes?"

"Then I will go," she said.

They managed to secure a table exactly opposite the main entrance, and a few minutes later Nora was enjoying the first decent meal she had tasted for over a month.

Under the influence of the unaccustomed food and the grateful warmth and light, she forgot her troubles and chatted to her companion with somewhat of her old animation and girlish abandon. But her forgetfulness was destined to be of short duration, for whilst she was in the very act of laughing at one of Meredith's sallies she suddenly caught sight of a well-known figure in the doorway, and the laugh died away in a gasp of stupefaction.

It was the figure of Mervyn Blake! If, as Meredith had said, he had been leading a life of luxury and gaiety, his face strangely belied the fact; for it was haggard and drawn, and his eyes had the hopeless look of a man who had drunk the cup of sorrow to its bitterest dregs.

He glanced wearily round the crowded room in search of a vacant place, and all at once his gaze encountered that of Nora.

A joyous light leapt into his eyes, the careworn look rolled from his face like a mist before the rising sun and he took a couple of eager strides toward her.

Then, for the first time, he perceived the figure of Adrian Meredith.

He reeled as though he had been struck. For one brief instant he regarded Nora and her companion with a stare of horrified incredulity, and then, with stifled groan, he turned on his heel and hurried away.

CHAPTER IV.

A HOMELESS WANDERER.

"THAT was an awkward *contretemps*, wasn't it?" remarked Meredith.

"He certainly seemed to find the situation rather embarrassing," she admitted.

"Oh, I wasn't looking at the matter from his point of view, but from yours!" he said.

"From mine?" she echoed with unaffected surprise. "In what way was the meeting awkward for me?"

"If you don't realize its awkwardness for yourself it is difficult for me to explain." he replied "Look at it in this light: A young lady, very beautiful, but very poor, runs away from home. For three months nothing whatever is heard of her, and then one of her former friends walks into a first-class London restaurant and sees her enjoying a *tête-à-tête* dinner in company with——"

He paused, for he saw that he had succeeded in making her understand, and he was too much of an artist to spoil his work by over-elaboration.

As for Nora, she was speechless with horror and indignation—horror for the false position into which her innocence had led her, and indignation against the man who had lured her into it.

"Of course you will have to marry me now!" said Meredith. "It is the only course that is open to you."

She made no reply. Indeed it is doubtful if she heard him, for her thoughts were absorbed in trying to devise some method of escaping from his hateful presence without creating a scene.

But her mind was in too chaotic a state to allow her to think calmly, and at last, in obedience to a sudden, reckless impulse, she started to her feet and walked quickly towards the door.

Quick as thought Meredith snatched up his hat and followed her, but before he had taken a dozen steps he was confronted by the waiter, who politely reminded him of the fact that he had omitted to pay for his dinner.

"It's all right, my good fellow!" said Meredith. "I only want to have a word with that lady before she goes, and then I'll come back and pay up."

The waiter smiled a pitying smile! He evidently thought that Meredith and Nora had arranged this little scene in order to escape without payment, and he muttered something under his breath to the effect that the "dodge was too thin!"

"Bother you, here's a sovereign!" said Meredith savagely. "You can give me the change when I come back," and he darted through the door through which Nora had already disappeared.

In the meantime Nora had made good use of the brief start she had obtained. As soon as she was safely outside the restaurant she broke into a run, doubled round the corner of the Haymarket, and never slackened pace until she reached Trafalgar Square. Still walking rapidly, she traversed the whole length of Whitehall, crossed over Westminster Bridge, turned to the right behind the hospital, and finally entered a dingy-looking house in one of the squalid streets that lie between the Albert Embankment and the Kennington Road.

This was to her "home," if it be not a degradation of the sacred word to apply it to the single dark and comfortless room for which she paid rent. At any rate it was the only home she possessed, though she was not fated to possess it long; for scarcely had she entered ere the landlady—a sour-faced, hard-featured woman—came into the room in a state of wrathful indignation.

"You're a nice 'un, I do think," was her greeting. "What d'ye mean by getting me into trouble with the police, and me wanting a fortnit's rent and working myself to a shadder to keep you in luxury and idleness."

"What do you mean?" demanded Nora. "What has happened?"

"What has happened?" bawled the woman. "Why a private detective has been here inquiring for you, and he's coming back at eight o'clock! What have you been and gone and done?"

"I have done nothing, of course," said Nora haughtily.

"Gammon!" said the woman.

"I assure you you are altogether mistaken in supposing that I have committed any breach of the law," said Nora. "I think I can explain what has happened. One of my principal objects in coming to London was to escape from the persecutions of a gentleman who wished me to be his wife. He has been moving Heaven and earth to find out where I am living, and I can only suppose that the detective who called here this afternoon is one of those he has employed to trace me. By the merest chance I met the gentleman of whom I have spoken, this evening; but I managed to give him the slip, and I hurried here, thinking that I should be safe from further molestation. As one of his spies has discovered my address, this house is no longer safe for me, and consequently I shall go away at once before the detective returns."

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"A bootiful story!" she said; "I don't say but wot there ain't some people who wouldn't believe it; but, bless you, I believes it, and so long as you pays up wot you owes——"

"But you know I have no money," said Nora.

"No money!" said the woman. "Then give me that ring to pawn, and I'll bring you the change," and she pointed to a simple gold ring, set with a single pearl, that adorned the third finger of Nora's right hand.

"But that—that—is the ring that was given to me by the man to whom I was engaged," said Nora piteously. "Don't force me to part with *that*."

"All right, please yourself, my dear!" said the landlady coolly. "But you ain't a-going to leave this house till you've paid wot you owe—and the detective will be back in twenty minutes!"

"Here—take it!" she said with a choking sob. "Bring me the change as quickly as you can, and in the meantime I will pack up my things."

The woman hurried away and Nora immediately set to work to collect her scanty belongings. Ten minutes sufficed for this and by that time the landlady had returned.

"I couldn't squeeze more'n seven-and-six out of 'em!" she said. "Here's your change, three-and-six. Will you have a cup of tea afore you go?"

"No, thank you," said Nora, picking up her little bag, which contained all her earthly possessions, turning out into the cold world once more—a homeless, friendless wanderer!

* * * * *

Ten minutes after she had gone the detective announced his arrival by a vigorous rat-a-tat.

"Well, has Miss Bryce returned?" he asked.

"Lawks, yes—hours ago!" said the landlady.

"That's all right," he said pleasantly. "Will you kindly inform her that I wish to see her?"

"Sorry I can't oblige you!" she answered. "'Cos she's gone!"

"Gone!" he thundered, striding forward and seizing her roughly by the arm. "What do you mean, woman?"

"I means wot I says!" she replied. "She paid up like a lady, so 'ow was I to stop her a-doing as she pleased?"

"Where has she gone?" he demanded.

"Arsk me another!" she said.

"You wretch, you've done me out of a reward of five hundred pounds!" he exclaimed in savage accents. "If you'd only kept her until I came, I would have given you ten for yourself.

"She's the heiress to a fortune of over £200,000, and the lawyers have offered a reward of five hundred to anyone who discovers her whereabouts. I've been at work on the case for over six months, and just when I looked like pulling it off, you've gone and upset the apple-cart by helping her to escape!" and he stalked away leaving her staring after him in dumfounded amazement.

CHAPTER V.

MEREDITH'S DUPLICITY.

SIX weeks after the events recorded in our last chapter a curious scene might have been witnessed in Adrian Meredith's bachelor apartments in St. John's Wood.

The actors were Meredith himself and a Jew named Levi, and the subject under discussion was the repayment of certain large sums of money which the latter had lent the artist on the security of various bills and promissory notes.

"Give me another week," said Meredith, "and by that time I shall be in a position to pay you every farthing I owe."

"Not another day!" said the Jew.

"I'm afraid you'll have to!" said Meredith.

"Ve'll see apout that!" said Levi grimly. "Dose names on the pack of dose pills are——"

"Forgeries!" said Meredith.

"Forgeries?" screamed the Jew.

"Every one of them!" said Meredith coolly. "I couldn't persuade any of my friends to affix their signatures to my bills, so I affixed them myself. In other words, those bills you hold in your hand aren't worth the paper they're written on, and you can't possibly recover a penny of the money you've lent me."

"Put I can send you to prison, my fine shentleman!" said Levi.

"Of course you can," said Meredith. "I don't doubt but that if you were to prosecute me for forgery and obtaining money by false pretences, you would get me sent to penal servitude for fifteen or twenty years. But what good would that do? It would be deucedly inconvenient for me, I admit, but it wouldn't benefit you to the extent of a single penny! If, on the other hand, you leave me alone for another week you will get back every stiver I have borrowed."

"You haf said that before!" retorted Levi. "Ven you vent to Ireland six months ago you said that you were going to marry a young lady of fortune and that everything would pe settled as soon as you came pack."

"And I honestly believed it!" answered Meredith. "The marriage was unavoidably postponed, however, but it's going to take place within the next few days."

"If I thought that vot you said vas true I vould vait a little longer," said the Jew. "Put how am I to know that you ain't fooling me? You haf talked a lot apout this marriage, put you haf never even told me the young lady's name."

"Well I don't mind telling you now, on the condition that you keep it a strict secret," said Meredith. "She's the only daughter of the late Sir Rupert Glynn."

"And who vas he?" asked Levi, shrewdly.

"He was nobody in particular at the time of his death," replied Meredith, "but twenty years or more ago he was governor of Newfoundland. Shortly before his appointment to that exalted position he married one of the Duke of Gloucester's daughters, and he took her out with him to Newfoundland, where she gave birth to a daughter, and died almost immediately afterwards.

"When the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester heard of Lady Glynn's death, they begged Sir Rupert to send his orphan child to them in order that they might undertake the responsibility of her bringing-up. To this proposal Sir Rupert gladly agreed, and the infant was accordingly sent to England in charge of a trusted nurse; but the vessel in which they sailed was lost at sea, and neither of them was ever afterwards heard of.

"Six or seven months ago Sir Rupert died, leaving a fortune approaching a quarter of a million. Though it was morally certain that his daughter was dead, the lawyers were compelled to advertise for her before proceeding to distribute his estate, and by the merest chance I happened to see one of their advertisements, which contained, amongst other things, a minute des-

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cription of a peculiar silver chain which the child was wearing when she left Newfoundland.

"As soon as I read the advertisement I remembered that I had seen that very chain! I couldn't remember where at first, but it presently came back to me that it had been shown to me by the wife of an Irish clergyman who had told me that it belonged to her adopted daughter, who had been washed ashore during a storm about nineteen years ago! You can guess what I did; I hurried over to Ireland and, finding that the girl was utterly ignorant of her good fortune, I proceeded to make violent love to her!

"In the meantime the girl's adopted parents had died, leaving her in charge of a stepmother who treated her so badly that she ran away from home before I had time to pop the question! Three months later I came across her in London, found that she still supposed herself to be a penniless orphan, and was about to renew my suit when she once more disappeared.

"To-day, however, I have received information from one of my agents that she is in the East end of London. I am going to see her, and in less than a week both she and her fortune will be mine, for, of course, I shall see that everything is settled on me at the time of the marriage.

"And now you know exactly how the matter stands," he said. "The question you have to decide, therefore, is whether you will ruin all my plans and forfeit all chance of getting your money, or whether you will give me another week's grace and trust to my common sense to avoid a scandal by paying you the money as soon as I have netted my victim."

Levi decided that he would adopt the latter course, and took his departure. Meredith was disturbed by a knock at the door, and in answer to his impatient "Come in!" there entered — Mervyn Blake!

She flung the paper from her as though it had been a venomous reptile.

"Where is Miss Carew?" he demanded abruptly.

"I haven't the slightest idea!" said Meredith coolly. "How should *I* know where she is?"

"How should *you* know?" said Mervyn. "Pray, who is so likely to know as you, who lured her away from home by means of promises which——"

"I beg your pardon!" interrupted Meredith. "I had nothing whatever to do with her leaving home. On the contrary, I suspect *you* had more to do with her hasty departure than I."

"That is nonsense!" said Mervyn curtly. "How could I be the cause of her running away?"

"Well, I can suppose that she heard and believed the false report that you had married the Princess Olga, and she did not wish to stop in Bundoran and see another woman taking the place she had hoped would be hers!"

"Good Heavens! Do you mean what you say?" cried Mervyn in an agonized voice, for he was not aware that Nora had ever heard of his reported marriage, and this explanation of her disappearance came upon him like a thunderbolt.

"Have you any grounds for suggesting that that is why she ran away?" he asked in choking accents. "Has she ever told you so?"

"Oh dear no!" said Meredith. "She has never mentioned your name to me, nor I to her. In fact, I have only seen her once since she left home, and that was on the evening when you saw us at the Cri. I came across her quite by accident and, finding that she was starving, I insisted on standing her a dinner. It was simply an act of charity, and I have never seen her or heard of her since. Indeed, to tell you the truth, Miss Carew has never crossed my thoughts until you mentioned her name just now!"

Mervyn gazed at him in silence for a second or two, and then he held out his hand.

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Meredith," he said in a husky voice. "I have evidently been labouring under a monstrous delusion. I thought that you had induced Nora to run away with you, and I came here this morning with the intention of urging you to act towards her in an honourable and straightforward manner. Thank Heaven my suspicions have proved to be unfounded, and I beg you to accept my sincere apology for the injustice I have done you."

"Say no more, my dear fellow!" said Meredith. "I can quite understand that appearances were against me, but I trust I have now convinced you that I was as innocent of any complicity in Miss Carew's disappearance as I am of any knowledge of her present whereabouts! Will you stay and have lunch with me?"

"No, thank you," said Mervyn sadly. "I must set to work at once to discover where my poor unfortunate darling is hiding in order that I may hasten to her and clear up the grievous misunderstanding which has parted us. Did she tell you where she was living when you met her?"

"I believe she did," said Meredith. "It was somewhere Hampstead way, I think, but I really forget the exact address. If I happen to remember it I will drop you a line. Where are you staying?"

Mervyn gave him the name of his hotel, and they parted.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DARKEST HOUR.

IN a long, low attic in a miserable house in Houndsditch three hollow-cheeked women sat sewing. The eldest of these women was the widow of a one-time prosperous solicitor; the second had once been a popular favourite on the music-hall stage; the third was Nora Carew!

In the eyes of the law they were the "lodgers" of the Russian Jew, who rented the house and for whom they

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worked; but to all intents and purposes they were his slaves. He gave them employment on condition that they lodged at his house, and the scale of payment was so arranged that no matter how hard they worked they could never, by any chance, earn as much money in one week as would pay for one week's board and lodging!

The result of this ingenious arrangement was that when once an unfortunate creature got into his clutches it was utterly impossible for her to ever extricate herself, and she was compelled to go on working for him, and getting deeper and deeper into his debt, until death or disease released her from her bondage.

The attic was not only the workroom of Nora and her two companions, but was also their living-room and bedroom!

As a rule, they worked in gloomy silence; but on the afternoon of which we write Nora's bitterness and despair had reduced her to that stage when she felt that she must either talk or go mad.

"I won't do any more work until Mr. Figorski provides us with a stove," she exclaimed; "my fingers are so numb with cold that I can scarcely hold the needle. If I stay here much longer I shall become a raving lunatic," she continued. "I wish to Heaven I had died before I set foot in this horrible place."

"You may well say that," said the solicitor's widow. "The woman that was here before you, dropped down dead at her work, and as I watched them carry her out of the house I positively envied her."

"And this is England, the Home of the Free!" said Nora bitterly. "From pulpit and platform the doctrine is preached and the boast is made that the British flag cannot shelter a slave, and here, in the very heart of the Empire, are slaves compared with whom the West Indian niggers were pampered idlers!"

Neither of her companions in misfortune made any reply to this impassioned speech, and she was just about to burst out into another torrent of invective when she heard Figorski's footsteps on the creaking stairs.

"There's a gentleman wishes to see you downstairs," said the Russian, thrusting his head in at the door and addressing Nora.

"To see me," she cried, "to see me, Mr. Figorski?"

"That's what I said," he answered curtly.

"The gentleman who wishes to see you would not tell me his name," he said. "He would only say that he had come to take you away if you were willing to go. I pointed out to him that you owed me for three weeks' board and lodging, and that if you left without notice I should require to be liberally compensated for the loss of your services," and pointing to a door at the foot of the stairs he continued:

"Your visitor is in there. He has asked me to allow him to have a few words with you in private before we discuss the question of terms."

She descended the remaining stairs, opened the door of the room he had indicated—and found herself face to face with Adrian Meredith.

"Here you are at last!" he exclaimed, when she entered the room, and almost before she knew what was happening he had caught her in his arms and was smothering her with kisses.

"My poor darling, how changed you are!" he continued. "Why did you run away from me—why did you spurn my offer of assistance?"

She tried to answer him, but her heart was too full for words, and burying her face in her hands, she burst into a flood of tears.

"There, there! There is nothing to cry about now, little woman," he said soothingly. "From this moment your sorrows are at an end. As soon as I have settled with your rascally employer I'm going to take you to a jolly little furnished flat in South Kensington, and I'm going to leave you there in charge of a maid I have engaged until I have procured a license and arranged for our wedding. We will be married the day after to-morrow—which is the earliest date the law will allow—and then——"

"Oh, hush!" she cried. "Why will you force me to give you pain at the very moment when my only desire is to show you how grateful I am for all your kindness? You know that I can never marry you!"

"And why not?" he asked.

"Do not ask me," she pleaded.

"But I must!" he insisted.

"Then I cannot marry you because I do not love you," she answered. "You will probably despise me for the confession I am about to make, but I feel it is my duty to be perfectly frank with you, and therefore I will not attempt to disguise the fact that I have given all the love of which I am capable to another man and although he has rejected it, I have no love left for anyone else."

"But surely your pride should prevent you bestowing your love on a man who has behaved with such heartless cruelty as Mervyn Blake," he suggested.

"It should," she admitted. "But my love is stronger than my pride, and although I have tried to efface the memory of Mervyn Blake from my thoughts I have never succeeded, and I never shall."

"Ah, well, *I* will teach you to forget him!" he replied. "You may not love me now, but in the days to come your heart will turn to mine as naturally as the sunflower turns to the sun!"

"Then you will wait a little while," she asked eagerly, but he shook his head.

"Can't you see that what you ask is impossible?" he answered. "You have already discovered, at the cost of bitter suffering, that you cannot struggle on alone. Then what are you going to do when I take you away from here? Go back to Bundoran?"

"Never!" she declared emphatically.

"Very well; then what *are* you going to do? I am the only one amongst your friends who is willing to help you; but I am a single man, and you cannot come and live with me except as my wife.

"Do not misunderstand me," he added. "These are not my terms, but the world's. For my own part I would willingly devote my whole life to your service without exacting anything in return, but this, as I have tried to show you, the world will not allow."

"Then I must either consent to marry you or else make up my mind to remain in this horrible place for the rest of my life?" she asked.

"I am afraid so," he said gravely.

Anything was better than going back to slavery, and stretching out her arms towards Meredith, she cried:

"Oh, take me away! For pity's sake take me away!"

"Then you will marry me?" he asked.

"Yes, yes!" she sobbed. "I will do anything in the world if you will only take me away from this horrible house!"

He kissed her with affected tenderness, and then, having called Figorski into the room, he paid him what he demanded, and sent him for a hansom. Ten minutes later he and Nora drove away, with Figorski's good wishes for their future happiness ringing in their ears!

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CHAPTER VII.

Sunshine After Rain.

About half-an-hour after Nora's departure the detective who had traced her to her previous lodgings knocked at the door of Figorski's house.

"I believe you have a young lady living here who calls herself Miss Bryce?" he said to the Russian who opened the door,

"Then you'll believe anything," said Figorski, with a coarse laugh. "There's nobody of that name living here," and he made as though he would slam the door in the detective's face.

"Half-a-minute, please!" said the latter, placing his foot in the doorway. "Your denial is doubtless prompted by the fear that I want to get you into trouble, but I give you my word of honour that I don't. On the contrary, if you will allow me to have five minutes' conversation with the young lady, I will guarantee that you are well rewarded for your kindness."

"I tell you she isn't here!" said Figorski impatiently. "She went away half-an-hour ago."

"Snakes alive! then I'm too late again!" growled the detective. "That's twice I've missed her by the skin of my teeth! Have you any idea where she's gone?"

"The gentleman who took her away ordered the cabby to drive them to Brincliffe Mansions, South Kensington," said Figorski. "I think he's going to——"

But the detective waited to hear no more. A hansom was passing at the moment, and without further ado he hailed the driver, sprang into the vehicle, and drove away to Brincliffe Mansions.

He had some little difficulty in finding the particular flat which Meredith had rented, but at last he succeeded in his quest, and, taking out one of his professional cards, he wrote on the back, "I am the bearer of good news," and sent it up with a polite request for an interview.

Nora was alone when the card was handed to her, for Meredith, after seeing her into her new quarters, had left her in order to make arrangements for the wedding. Her first inclination was to refuse the detective admission, but upon reading the pencilled message on the back of his card, her curiosity overcame her reluctance, and she instructed the maid to show him up.

Having gained admittance to her presence the detective wasted no time in preliminaries, but in a few business-like phrases informed her that she was the daughter and heiress of the late Sir Rupert Glynn, and that a fortune of nearly a quarter of a million awaited her acceptance.

To say that she was dumfounded by his news is but feebly to describe her feelings!

At one bound she had passed from poverty to affluence, but the delight she would otherwise have experienced was marred by the thought that she had plighted her troth to Adrian Meredith.

"If only I had known this a couple of hours ago!" she muttered to herself in agitated tones. "It would be despicable to break my promise because I am no longer dependent on Mr. Meredith's generosity. He wooed me when I was destitute and friendless, and now that I am rich I must not—I dare not be guilty of the baseness of breaking my word."

"Are there any of your friends to whom you would like to communicate the news of your good fortune?" asked the detective, who was ignorant, of course, of the tempest that was raging in her mind.

"I know of no one who would be glad to hear of it," she answered bitterly.

"Well, I know of *one*, at any rate!" was his prompt retort. "Mr. Mervyn Blake has been moving Heaven and earth to discover your whereabouts, and only this morning he came to my office and wanted to engage me. I didn't tell him that I was hunting for you on my own account, but I promised that if I heard anything of you I would let him know. Now that I have earned the reward your lawyers have offered, I shall go straight to Mr. Blake's hotel and tell him where you are."

She had not the heart to forbid him, and three-quarters of an hour later Mervyn burst into the room in a state of the wildest excitement.

"So I have found you at last!" he cried, clasping her in his arms in spite of her feeble efforts to repulse him. "Oh, Nora, my darling, why did you run away? Is it possible that you credited that lying rumour that I was married to the Princess Olga Dianovitch? Mr. Meredith hinted as much to me, but I find it hard to believe that your faith in my love was so weak."

"Then wasn't it true?" she asked in a happy whisper.

"Of course it wasn't!" he replied indignantly. "That rascally father of mine inserted the announcement in the papers in order to hoodwink the money-lenders. He thought they would be willing to lend him more money if he made them believe that his son had married the daughter of a Russian millionaire, and some of them were foolish enough to swallow the bait."

"But why did you not answer my last letter?" she asked. "Why did you leave me for three months without any news of you?"

"That is also easily explained," he said. "Whilst I was in St. Petersburg I became acquainted with a certain Count Demidoff, and as he proved to be a charming young fellow we became fast friends. Unknown to me, Demidoff was a member of some secret society, and one night, whilst he and I were dining together, the police walked in and arrested us—him as a Nihilist and me as a supposed accomplice.

"We spent three months in prison and then we managed to escape, principally through the heroic exertions of Princess Olga Dianovitch, to whom Demidoff was engaged to be married. By helping us to escape, the Princess, of course, rendered herself liable to severe punishment, so she had to flee the country as well as we. She and Demidoff were married in Vienna, and then we all came over to Ireland, where they will remain until the storm has blown over."

"I saw you and the Princess in a jeweller's shop in Grafton Street," said Nora; and she told him when and how.

"You little goose!" he said, when she had narrated the circumstances. "She was choosing a wedding present for her husband, and I was merely helping her to choose it. When she spoke of her 'husband' it was to Demidoff she was referring, of course, and not to me!

"And now what are your plans for the future?" he asked in conclusion. "My visit to Russia has made me a comparatively rich man, and there is now no longer any reason why we should not be married at once. Shall the wedding take place in London here, or shall we go back to the Ould Counthry? I vote for Ould Oireland; what say you?"

"Oh, Mervyn!" she cried, with a little sob. "Why didn't you come to me before? I cannot marry you now. I have promised to marry Adrian Meredith!"

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"Marry Meredith!" he exclaimed, turning deathly white. "You can't mean that! Why, he told me only this morning that he hadn't the smallest particle of love for you, and that if ever he married it would be for money!"

This startling revelation made Nora strongly suspect that Meredith had known all along that she was Sir Rupert's daughter, and that that was why he had wooed

"Oh, Mervyn," she cried with a little sob. "Why didn't you come to me before? I cannot marry you now."

her with such stubborn perseverence. Before she had time to communicate her suspicions to Mervyn, however, the door was suddenly flung open, and Meredith himself burst into the room.

"I've got the license!" he began, and then, seeing Mervyn, he started back with an involuntary oath! He recovered composure with wonderful celerity, however, and advancing to Nora with an air of pretended agony he said:

"You are not going to throw me over at the eleventh hour are you, Nora?"

"That depends entirely upon yourself," she answered quietly. "Mr. Blake has just informed me that the paragraph you showed me announcing his marriage was false. I strongly suspect that you have known this for some time, yet you have allowed me to believe that it was true. I also suspect that you have heard some other news, of which Mr. Blake is still ignorant; but in spite of all this I am prepared to keep my promise to marry you if you still desire me to do so."

"Of course I do," he answered, joyously.

"Wait until I have finished, please!" she said coldly. "As I have just said, I will marry you in spite of all that has occurred if you insist upon my doing so, but before the wedding takes place I shall execute a deed bequeathing all I possess to the poor of Bundoran!"

"You can't mean what you say!" he gasped.

"Indeed I do!" she answered firmly, and with just a touch of contempt in her voice. "You have professed to love me for myself alone—now is your opportunity to prove your sincerity! What is your answer?"

He gazed at her with a look in which baffled rage and venomous spite struggled for the mastery. He tried to voice the fury that possessed him, but the words would not come, and after one or two convulsive twitchings of his livid face, he uttered a choking cry and fell prostrate across the rug.

They rushed to his assistance, but death had already marked him for his own, and a couple of hours later he died, without ever having recovered consciousness.

* * * * * *

With the death of Adrian Meredith the last of the shadows that had darkened Nora's life passed away and henceforth all was sunshine.

Her claim to Sir Rupert's wealth was never disputed, and the first use she made of her newly-acquired fortune was to liberate the two unfortunate women who had been her fellow-slaves in Figorski's house.

Six weeks later she and Mervyn were married in Bundoran church, and the first to offer her congratulations to the blushing bride was—the Princess Olga Demidoff, née Dianovitch!

THE END.

HORRIBLE THREAT.—Mother (firmly to little daughter who is about to have a tooth drawn): "Now, May, if you cry I'll never take you to a dentist's again."

MRS. A.: "Are you troubled much in your neighbourhood with borrowing?" Mrs. B. (innocently): "Yes, a good deal. My neighbours don't seem to have anything I want."

BOY: "Pa, if I ask you an arithmetic question what I can answer right and you can't, will you give me a penny?" Pa: "Indeed, I will. What is it?" "How many postage stamps can I buy for four and twopence?" "Fifty." "Wrong. I can buy a hundred."

"WHY do you write under an assumed name, Mr. Scribe? You do so well that I should think you'd be proud to have your name identified with your work," asked the inquisitive young woman. "Well, the fact is, madam, I want posterity to say that I made my name for myself. The one I bear my parents gave me," explained Mr. Scribe, and the inquisitive young woman was satisfied.

OFF THE SCENT.—A certain shop-walker was noted for his severity to those under him. One day he approached a junior assistant whose counter a lady had just left. "You let that lady go out without making a purchase?" he asked severely. "Yes, sir, I——" "And she was at your counter fully ten minutes?" "Doubtless; but then you see——" "Exactly. I saw that, in spite of all the questions she put to you, you rarely answered her, and never attempted to get what she wanted." "Well, but——" "You need not make any excuse. I shall report you for your carelessness." "Well, I hadn't what she wanted." "What was that." "Six shillings! She's a book-canvasser." The shop-walker retired.

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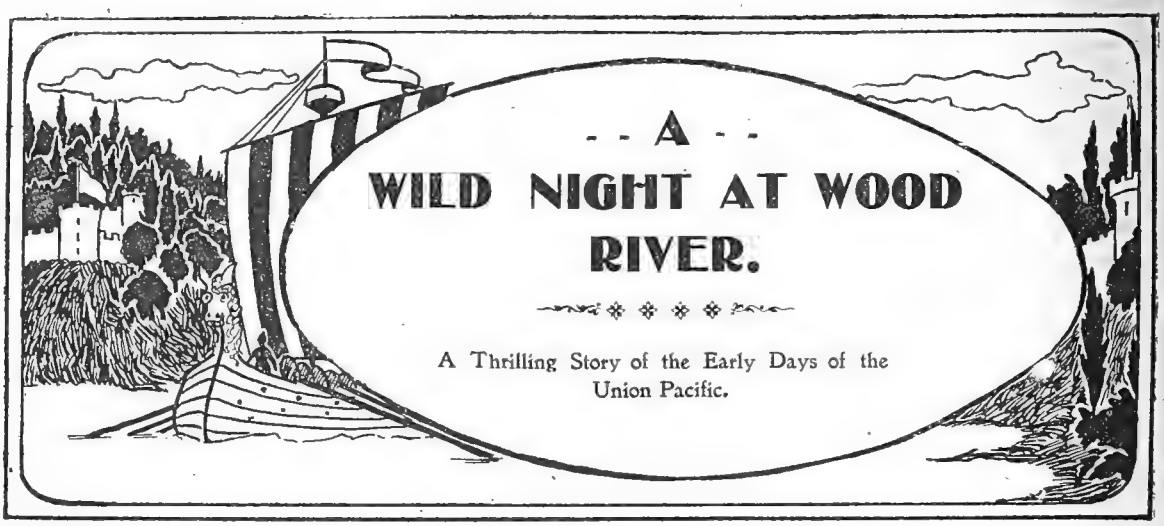

A WILD NIGHT AT WOOD RIVER.

A Thrilling Story of the Early Days of the Union Pacific.

"KEEP that kid quiet," said Bankers in a hoarse whisper.

"I'm doing the best I can," said his wife, trying to hush the little one, who was sobbing and moaning in her lap.

In the baby's milk waggon a bitter fight was going on between paregoric and pain, and the latter was dying hard. The wind drove the rain against the side of the car and made it rock to and fro.

"Emma," said Mrs. Bankers to her friend, "take that bottle and hold it between you and a crack in the car, and when it lightens drop ten drops into the spoon. I suppose we must not strike a light?"

"You bet you don't strike any light here unless you are ready to give up your chignon," said Bankers without taking his eyes from the crack through which he was peeping.

Emma took the bottle, and at each flash of lightning dropped a drop of hush medicine into the spoon, and when she had put in ten drops they gave it to the baby. That made twenty drops. It was dangerous, but it was sure death to all of them if the baby cried aloud.

The rain came in great sheets and with such force that it seemed that the car could hardly hold the rail. It was not a Pullman car, just a common red stock car standing on a siding, with a few armfuls of straw upon the floor.

Occasionally Bankers turned to glance at the two women who were crouching in one end of the car, and when the lightning lit up their faces they were fearful to behold. Now the rain, cold as sleet, came through the cracks in the car and stung the faces of those within.

Mrs. Bankers had seen three winters at Wood River, but her friend, the young woman who had come out to Western Nebraska to teach in a school, was in every sense a tenderfoot, and the experience of this wild night had almost driven her mad.

"There they are," whispered Bankers.

Now the women put their eyes to a crack, and when a flash came they could see a reef of feathered heads that formed a half-circle around the house, like a feather boa about a woman's neck.

Half the band dismounted and made a rush for the cottage. The door was broken, and the red devils swarmed in. One of them took a newspaper and lighted it at the open fireplace to make a torch, and by the light of it the little party in the stock car could see the Sioux running, half-crouching, from room to room in search of the occupants.

Finding the place deserted, and smarting under their disappointment, the Indians now set fire to the house, and by the light of it started to loot the railway-station less than a hundred yards away.

The station agent had been warned, as the others had been, by a Pawnee scout, but had bravely refused to leave his post. He had made no light, but sat in one end of the dark little room which served as ticket office, telegraph office, and sleeping room, and as the Indians approached opened fire.

At the very first shot the leader of the murderous band leapt high into the air, came down on his feet, leapt up again and again, and finally fell in a heap to rise no more. With a deafening yell the angry band made a rush for the door and began to beat against it with tomahawks, clubs, and guns.

Having emptied his rifle, the agent now took up a pair of 45-calibre revolvers, and the lead fairly rattled against the door, and no fewer than half-a-dozen savages sank to the platform, causing the besiegers to fall back a space. From a distance they began to pour the lead into the building; but the agent, crouching behind the little iron safe, was still unhurt.

An Indian brought a torch from the burning cottage and attempted to fire the station, but the rain and wind put out the fire. Two or three Sioux, noticing a string of cars upon the siding, began to search for stock or eatable freight. From car to car they ran, thrusting their rifles into the straw.

"Uh!" said an old buck as his rifle found something soft in one of the cars, and Bankers felt a hurt in his short ribs. Laying hold of the side of the car, the Indian began to pull and strain. By the merest chance he had taken hold of the car door, and now, as it opened, he thrust his hideous head inside.

Bankers could have blown the top of the Sioux's head off, but he knew that to fire would be to attract a dozen redskins, against whom he could not hope to hold out long.

The women scarcely breathed. The baby, full of

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paregoric, slept as though it had already entered upon its final rest.

The other two Indians had given up the search among the empty cars and gone back to the station, where the agent, having reloaded all his guns, kept the gang hopping and dancing about the station platform.

The old Sioux at the car door cocked his head and listened. He must have fancied he heard something breathe, for now he put his hands upon the sill and leapt into the car. He had scarcely straightened up when Bankers' rifle barrel fell across his feathered head, and he dropped like a leaf.

The schoolma'am uttered a faint scream, and that was the last sound that came from her corner for some time. The Sioux never moved a finger, and Bankers, having removed the warrior's fireams and ammunition, gave the gun to his wife and then covered the dead Sioux with straw.

Already the little frame cottage had burnt to the ground, and the rain had nearly quenched the fire. Every attempt made by the band to fire the station had ended in failure, and the Sioux were now preparing to storm the fort.

It was hard for Bankers to keep quiet in the car while the agent sold his life bravely and so dearly to the Sioux, but there were his wife and baby and the helpless schoolma'am, who had been persuaded by the Bankers to come to this wild region, and he felt it his duty to protect them as best he could.

Presently Bankers felt the stock car vibrate perceptibly, as though it were being rolled slowly along the rails. His first thought was that the Indians were pushing the empty cars down near the station, and that they would set fire to the straw, and then there would be no possible escape.

Now there was a roar as of an approaching train, and an instant later a great dark object hove in sight drawing a dozen box cars and running without a headlight. The shouts of the besiegers, the rattle of rifles, and the wild cry of the night prevented the Sioux from feeling the vibration or hearing the sound of the approaching train.

The agent, who had been severely wounded, now crawled to the key and called Ogallala. At the first attack he had wired for help, and now he told the operator there he could hold the place only a little while longer.

The agent was still at the key when the engine, rolling up to the station, shook the building, and he knew the moment he felt the quiver of it that help was at hand.

Instantly the doors of the box cars came open, and a company of government scouts, all Pawnees except the officers, leapt to the ground. The Sioux were making their last desperate charge upon the station. Before they could realize that reinforcements were at hand they were beset by the scouts, who always fought to kill. The battle was short and decisive, and when the Sioux fled they left more than half their number upon the field.

Probably the most anxious man in the whole party was the conductor of the special train that had brought the scouts from Ogallala. He had ridden all the way on the locomotive, and the moment the train stopped he had leapt to the ground and gone through a shower of bullets to where the cottage which had been the home of the Bankers had stood. The sight of the house in ashes made him sick at heart, but there was still hope.

They might have taken refuge in the station, and, facing about, the fearless conductor fought his way to the door. By this time the Sioux were giving all their attention to the scouts, and the conductor forced his body through the shot-riddled door. The agent lay upon the floor in a pool of his own blood, but he was still alive.

"Where are they?" asked the conductor, glancing about the dark room.

"Among the stock cars, if they are still alive," was the reply which came in a faint whisper. "I saw them leaving the house at dusk. Go to them—I'm—I'm all right."

And the conductor, having placed the wounded man upon his bed, made for the stock cars.

"Bankers, where are you?" he called, and Bankers answered only two cars away.

Now the conductor lighted his white light and climbed into the car. The brave Mrs. Bankers greeted him with a smile that soon changed to tears, for in the light of the hand lamp she had seen her baby's face, and it looked like the face of a dead child.

"Emma," she cried excitedly, but there was no answer.

"Is she dead?" cried the conductor, falling upon his knees and holding the light close to his sweetheart's face.

"No, you chump," said Bankers. "She only fainted when I killed this Sioux," and he gave the dead Indian a kick and rolled him out of the car.

"But the baby?" pleaded Mrs. Bankers.

"She's all right," said the husband. "Only a little too much paregoric." And so it proved.

"Here, Em," said Bankers, shaking the young woman, who was regaining consciousness, "brace up. You've got company."

"Are we all safe?" asked the schoolma'am, feeling for her back hair. "Oh, my dear, brave friend, you have saved us all."

"Yes," said Bankers, "I've been hiding here in the straw while the agent was being murdered."

"But you saved the women," said the conductor, who was overjoyed at finding all alive.

"Yes," said Bankers, "that's something after all."

And all this is not a dream. It is only a scrap of history of the early days of the Union Pacific. The brave station agent is an old man now, and one of his legs is shorter than the other—the one that was shot that night.

The baby, having recovered from her severe tussle with colic and paregoric, is now one of the most charming women in a western city.

The conductor of the soldier train is at the time of writing a general superintendent of a well known railway. The snows of forty winters have fallen upon his wife's hair. It is almost white, but her face is still young and handsome, and I remember that she blushed when telling this story to me and recalling the fact that she had fainted in a stock car on that wild night at Wood River.

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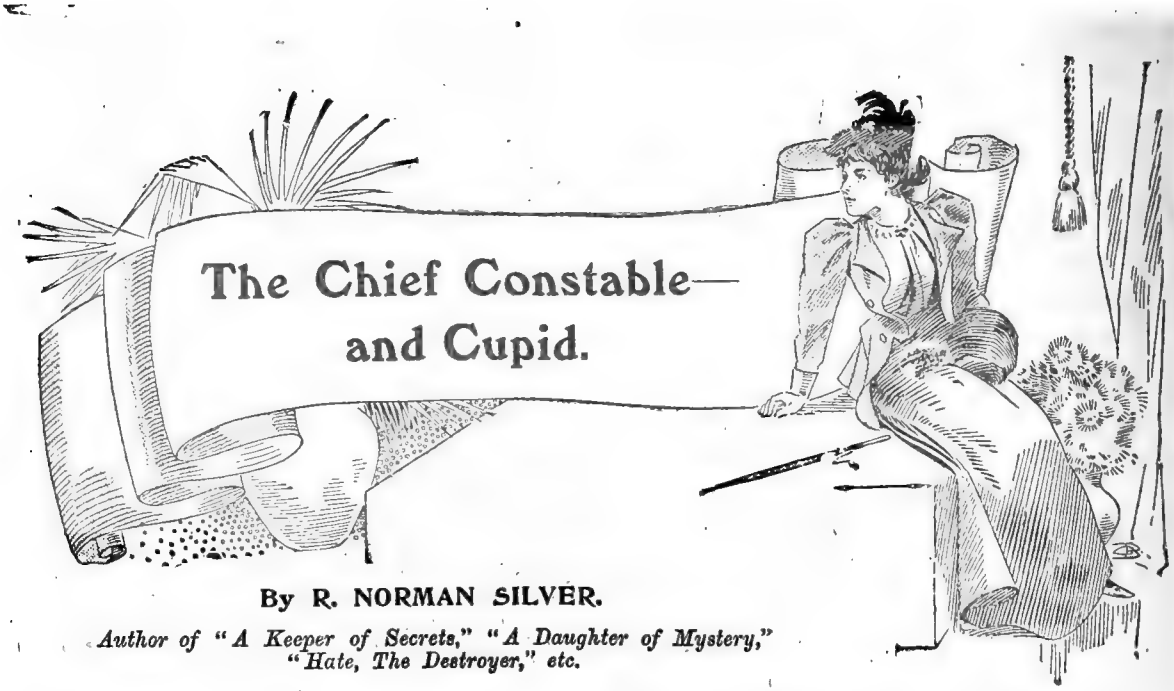

The Chief Constable—and Cupid.

By R. NORMAN SILVER.

Author of "A Keeper of Secrets," "A Daughter of Mystery," "Hate, The Destroyer," etc.

I.

Captain Montague Chatteris, Chief Constable of Duchester, sat in his private room over the arched entrance of the grimy, stone fronted block which formed the central police offices of that thriving town.

Above the swarming streets and lanes of Duchester a spring night had unfolded its delicate veil; in house and shop, tramcar and hansom, the lights of Duchester jewelled the soft May evening.

The chief constable was running rapidly through a little heap of reports, indorsing them with marks of criticism or of approval. The glow of the green-shaded electrical lamp upon his desk showed a stalwart figure and a keen, good tempered face.

Captain Chatteris was no longer a young man, and yet he by no means deserved the description "middle-aged." In his loose tweed "mufti," he might have furnished a perfect illustration of that much misused phrase—the prime of life.

His task was interrupted by the entrance of a clerk—a typical policeman in plain clothes. A card laid deferentially near the chief constable's elbow explained his errand.

Montague Chatteris glanced at it, then threw down his pen and sprang up.

"Show her in immediately," he instructed.

The clerk returned to the door, opened it and stepped on one side.

A lady passed him into the shadowy apartment, moving with rustling haste and cheerful feminine confidence. She wore a trailing evening gown, all black lace and sequins, and a handsome cloak covered her white shoulders. Her features were still fresh and vigorous, though the piled tresses of her stylish coiffure were silvered by years and experience. She held out her hand to the chief constable.

"My dear Montague!" she said, warmly; "well, here I am, doing my best to look the part of fairy godmother."

Captain Chatteris bowed over the soft fingers that had lingered sympathetically in his. As the door closed he put his visitor into a seat and stood beside her.

"I am wondering, Mrs. Arnison," he began, almost nervously; "what you are thinking of me."

The other laughed merrily.

"Admiring you, my dear Montague," she retorted; "there, I always knew you'd do something romantic and unlikely—it's terrible business to be thirty-nine and a bachelor. Come, tell me about her; I'm to see her in a few moments, remember."

The chief constable twisted his long moustache in an embarrassed fashion.

"She—she is a schoolmistress," he said bluntly; "a head-mistress, though sadly too young for it. I—I met her when driving home one tempestuous evening. You know the open road between Duchester and Linacre; her school is at Linacre, and she walks three miles every morning and afternoon. Poor child, she was without an umbrella and in a fair way to be drowned outright. Of course, I took her up and drove her back to Duchester in my gig."

"And fell in love with her on the journey," concluded Mrs. Arnison.

"N-no," stammered Montague Chatteris; "that finished it, no doubt, but I had noticed her before that."

"Just so," assented Mrs. Arnison; "and now as you want an evening's flirtation in comfort, you bring me back from London to go to this dull ball of his worship the Mayor, and chaperone Miss—Miss——"

"Miss Beatrice East," said the chief constable of Duchester, and flushed as he uttered the name.

Mrs. Arnison rose and put her finger-tips on his arm.

"Montague," she remarked gravely; "I was your mother's friend and I am yours. Look into your own heart and tell me, is it a whim or a passion? Pause before you answer. Recollect, Duchester society—such as it is—will probably snub her and pity you. I will not ask if Miss East is a lady and a good woman—I know you too well to question it. Ultimately you will live down any annoyance, but only if you have

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Mrs. Arnison rose and put her finger tips on his arm.

love to help you. Can you assure me that you have?"

Montague Chatteris turned his proud head away.

"I did not believe," he answered huskily, "that I could love—until I met Beatrice East."

Mrs. Arnison sighed as she resumed her seat; she felt the throb in the words.

"And Miss East herself," she queried, "are you certain of her?"

A gleam of anxiety came into the chief constable's eyes.

"Mrs. Arnison," he said frankly, "I wish I could say yes without qualification or demur. Ask me if she loves me, and I can swear it—ask me if she is happy in that love and I dare not reply. She seems to—to fear me."

"She fears for you," corrected his adviser; "I like her the better, because she is sufficiently unselfish—women are only unselfish when they love. But perhaps I can help you; at all events, if you will let me, I will try. Get Miss East to give up her position and come to me in London. The season is going to be a brilliant one—I will promise she shall enjoy herself thoroughly for six weeks, then you shall marry and bring her back to Duchester under my wing. We will see if Duchester society cares to quarrel with me."

Captain Chatteris looked down undecidedly.

"Beatrice is very proud," he said, "she may not consent. But if she will I shall be only too happy, Mrs. Arnison. Indeed, you spoke the truth when you offered to play the part of a fairy god-mother."

Mrs. Arnison was not listening to these sentences of gratitude She sat trifling with her fan, apparently lost in thought. When she roused herself it was to put a significant inquiry.

"Montague," she demanded, "has Miss East any relatives?"

The chief constable knitted his brows.

"Her mother is dead," he responded; "she seems reluctant to talk of her other relations. I—I have not pressed her. Mrs. Arnison"—he stooped over the stately person in his easy-chair—"don't think me a romantic fool when I say that I trust her blindly, unreservedly. Why should I insult her by absurd investigations into her respectability"

"Montague!" said Mrs. Arnison, gravely, "I am an old woman and your friend and therefore privileged. Forgive me, then, if I urge you to remember that there is no truer test of love than confidence. If Miss East withholds one you have the right to ask if she has given the other."

Montague Chatteris winced and would have answered. But the words died on his lips as the clerk entered once more.

"A lady to see you, sir," he explained, "her name is Miss East and she says she has an appointment. I told her you were engaged, sir, but she asked me to say she was here."

The chief constable glanced apologetically at his guest and hastened into the outer office. The clerk held the door open as he returned, showing in a slight and feminine figure, in sweeping eau de nil silk. The hood of her pink opera-cloak was thrown over her head; so closely, she might have been desirous of escaping some unwelcome scrutiny.

Finding herself alone with Mrs. Arnison and Captain Chatteris, she pushed it back and the former saw a sensitive brunette countenance, with soft black hair, wide, dark eyes and features as delicate as those of a cameo.

It was at the face of Beatrice East rather than at Mrs. Arnison that the chief constable looked as he introduced them, a little nervously.

"I am very glad to know you, Miss East," said the elder woman, cordially; "I owe you an apology for delaying my return from London to this unconscionable hour. I am afraid I must have inconvenienced you sadly."

"Indeed, indeed, no," rejoined Beatrice East, colouring; "it is I who must have inconvenienced you. I am very sorry, but Captain Chatteris——"

"Told you I wouldn't miss either you or the Mayor's ball for worlds," interpolated Mrs. Arnison, cheerfully, "and he did quite right. And now, as time is flying and my carriage is blocking up the courtyard below, I think I shall have to hurry you, my good people. Why, my dear Montague, you're not dressed yet."

The chief constable laughed.

"That must not delay you," he said, "I have one or two matters to attend to before leaving."

Beatrice East turned to him anxiously.

"Oh!" she cried, "you—are you not coming?"

Mrs. Arnison smiled—the tone was so eager and childlike; there could be no doubt that Miss East was in love with Captain Montague Chatteris. The next moment the girl had shrunk into herself, as if abashed.

Captain Chatteris glanced at his watch.

"In half-an-hour at the latest," he promised, "I have only to interview a detective who has rather a singular case in hand. Meanwhile, let me pilot you through the corridors of this melancholy hole."

He drew the door wide for them to pass out. As he escorted them through the wide office beyond his private apartment, they met a bluff, square-shouldered man in civilian costume. The constable nodded to him.

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"You might step into my room, inspector," he said, "I want to see you before I go."

The inspector paused to salute. Suddenly he caught sight of the figure in the pale green silk, his eyes travelled up it to the dark handsome face. Beatrice East turned sharply away, raised an arm to her silken ho d and tremblingly lifted it over her pretty head. Then the little party moved on down the stone lobby. But the inspector stood, as though at attention, gazing after the three. Then with a puzzled gesture of a broad brown palm, he went into the chief constable's private room.

The girl held up to him a folded strip of paper.

Soon he heard the sound of the Captain's step as his superior returned.

"Ah, Potts," remarked the chief constable; "here you are. I'm afra'd I can't spare you very much time, but still, I wanted to hear your news. The Superintendent told me you had found a clue or something very like it."

Inspector Potts coughed.

"It's a moral certainty, sir," he said slowly, fidgeting with a heavily-shodden foot upon the worn carpet; "but only a moral one. I'm afraid we shall have to make a raid to get evidence. You see, they put me on a difficult case and then it's a matter of instinct and 'straws show which way the wind blows.' But the stipendiary has a very bad opinion of my 'straws,' sir, and if we go to a justice for a warrant it's like advertising it in the papers."

"Well," rejoined Montague Chatteris, good-humouredly, for the inspector was a privileged person, "let me know what your 'straws' are, Potts, and I will see what can be done."

Potts came closer to his chief and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"It's Flash Mat's lot, sir," he explained, with conscious importance. "That's what put me on to it. It was a regular puzzle to me before—half-a-dozen smart criminals in a town such as Duchester and not a thing against them for three months. I suspected it meant a head-centre of some sort had been planted here and they were anxious not to draw our attention to it. When I saw Mat I was certain."

"Flash Mat," murmured the chief constable; "he was in that forged bill affair five or six years ago."

"And got put away for four years," said Potts; "now, he's back at his o'd games again—the smartest swell criminal in the country. He's staying at the Grand, sir, and as thick as peas with some of the best in Duchester. Why, he's to be at the Mayor's ball to-night."

Montague Chatteris laughed.

"The bold villain," he commented, half-admiringly. "But what is he doing down here?"

"Having a quarterly settlement with the gang," said Inspector Potts, wrathfully; "that is, if my instinct isn't wrong, sir. And who do you think is in Duchester, too—old Josh the schoolmaster, Josh East his real name is. Josh is the most beautiful forger and false coiner in Europe and the old fox has never once been nabbed. Once, in Birmingham, I thought I had him, but he slipped through my fingers. But mark my words, sir, if Flash Mat and Josh the schoolmaster are in the same town there's business between them."

Montague Chatteris was not listening, he was knitting his brows absently. He seemed as if he were pursuing the answer to some simple calculation, the solution of which persistently escaped him. The inspector watched him intently. Presently the chief constable spoke.

"Why do you call this Josh East 'Josh the schoolmaster'?" he asked, and bent to poke the dwindling fire.

"Because he was once a schoolmaster," answered Potts calmly, "a very clever man is Master Josh—East."

Something in the pronounciation of the last name arrested the chief constable's attention. He flung down the poker and faced about.

"When I knew him in Birmingham, five years ago," went on Inspector Potts, deliberately, "he had a couple of pretty daughters, one nearly a woman, the other only a child. One was called Tessa, short for Esther, the other Trixy, short for Beatrice."

The speaker met, quietly and unwaveringly, the eye of Captain Chatteris.

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"The younger of the two ladies that went out of this room ten minutes ago," he said steadily, "was Trixy East."

Montague Chatteris raised a hand and passed it across his forehead, quiveringly. Inspector Potts stiffened himself, and changing his tone to one of crisp formality, completed his statement.

"I've spotted the place where the gang works," he pursued, "that is," he added with native caution, "if all is as I suspect. And if you approve, sir, a raid might give us the whole lot of them, plant and all."

The chief constable turned to his desk and began to finger the blue paper reports.

"You are right," Potts, he said, sternly, "make what arrangements you choose."

The inspector waited to receive any further instructions.

None being vouchsafed, he saluted and made as if to go. As he reached the door Montague Chatteris spoke again, slowly and drily.

"See that there is no unneccessary scandal," he commanded, "in the case of any innocent—persons."

Inspector Potts saluted once more, and with a pitying glance at the drooping figure of his superior, took his departure.

The chief constable sank into his chair and laid his head on his arms; once, his shoulders heaved and his strong frame shook.

Suddenly the clock on the mantel began to chime—Chatteris counted the strokes; it was the hour after ten. He rose and began to dress.

Twenty minutes later he was crossing the principal street of Duchester on his way to the town-hall.

II.

"PLEASE, sir, are you Captain Chatteris?"

The chief constable paused before the pillared portico of the Town-hall. Beside him stood a young girl, still in her teens—to judge by the loose locks that fell upon her coquettish shoulders—and of a quaint, though undeniable beauty.

She was well, if simply dressed, and not in the least embarrassed. To Montague Chatteris her face seemed vaguely familiar.

"Yes, little one," he answered, kindly "that is my name. What can I do for you, my child?"

The girl held up to him a folded strip of paper.

"Please, I was to ask you to read it at once," she added.

Chatteris complied with the request.

The opened sheet proved to contain a single perplexing sentence:

"If Captain Chatteris wishes to do Beatrice East the service of a life-time he will accompany the bearer, immediately and alone."

The chief constable gazed at the words, bewildered and uncomprehending. He glanced from the note to the countenance of the little person who had given it to him. She bore an unmistakable resemblance to Beatrice East—could she be the sister Tessa of whom Inspector Potts had spoken? Into what bizarre entanglement had Fate and Cupid led him? An officer of Justice, no less than, he trusted, a gentleman.

"This letter is not in Miss East's handwriting," he said guardedly, "and Miss East herself is waiting for me a few yards away. So, before I do what the paper asks. I will consult Miss East herself."

The messenger shook her picturesque head.

"I'll wait till you've been in if you like," she told him, "but you won't see Trixy all the same. Run along and make sure—only be quick."

Astonished beyond measure at this unceremonious style of address, the chief constable acted on the suggestion and strode through the decorated hall-way into the ball-room. Mrs. Arnison saw his tall figure and came hastily to meet him.

"I have some unexpected news for you," she said nervously; "word was sent to Miss East that her—her father had met with an accident and wished to see her. I gathered that the worst was feared. She left at once, poor girl."

Montague Chatteris tried to collect his thoughts. If Potts had told him the truth, Beatrice East was the daughter of an expert forger, a brilliant scoundrel none the less a criminal because he had contrived to elude the clutches of the Law. To what evil haunts might she not have bent her steps at his command? The criminal seldom dies in an odour of respectability.

The chief constable murmured a few reassuring phrases in Mrs. Arnison's ear, and hurriedly retraced the route to the portico. On the edge of the shadow flung from the temporary awning that spanned the pavement, the girl who had given him the mysterious note was standing.

Chatteris joined her and walked a trifle further into the gloom that flanked the Town-hall block. Here he halted and would have put a question, but his companion snapped her fingers loudly and a hansom, appearing suddenly from the dusk, drew to the kerb. The girl moved towards it.

The chief constable hesitated. Then he reflected that he was Beatrice East's accepted lover, that against her he knew nothing, and that he held in his hand a summons to her side. The man in him conquered the official, he jumped into the cab. His companion following, they were borne off at a gallop.

Contrary to Chatteris' anticipation, the driver did not seek the lower quarter of the town—he made for the broad road that led to the open country, through a solitary and decaying suburb. Some fifteen minutes hard going—during which the captain sought vainly to converse with his guide—brought them to a detached villa, at the end of a grass-grown street. In front of the villa the thoroughfare stopped, at the skirt of a broken meadow destined for building-lots that had found no purchasers.

Apparently the driver of the hansom had been satisfied beforehand, for he turned his horse's head without waiting for his fare.

A curious emotion flitted over Montague Chatteris as he heard the iron-shod hoofs die away on the macadam. The loneliness of the place seemed eerie—there were no lights at any of the visible windows of the villa, and only one rusty gas-standard to twenty yards of side-walk.

His guide ran up the steps of the dark house and knocked—peculiarly; then motioned to the chief constable to enter. He complied with the request, and gained an unilluminated lobby; the girl passed down it, and opened a door—through which there poured a flood of radiance. Chatteris followed and passed in, blinking. Someone slipped between him and the exit. The next instant he had perceived that the room was tenanted by half-a-dozen men of various ages. Of Beatrice East there was no sign.

A tall and sinister fellow in evening-dress lounged forward. "Welcome, Captain," he said mockingly, "gentlemen, this is the Chief Constable of Duchester;

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Captain, a choice selection of blackguards, at your service."

There was a murmur of coarse amusement among the persons referred to.

"Come, Mat," put in an older and shorter man, in a rusty black frock coat, "to business. Captain Chatteris, you have been decoyed here for a very simple reason. We have grounds for knowing that your men have picked up our scent—we chose to act before they ran us down. Tessa, give the Captain a seat."

The girl who had guided the chief constable to this singular trap pushed a battered chair into the light of the hanging lamp that swung above the deal table at one side of the room. Chatteris strode to it mechanically and sat down. He noticed that the table was littered

As he stared at the nearing figures, he saw that the door by which he himself had entered began to open stealthily.

with an assortment of inks, graduated pens, delicate steel knives, and two or three bottles with ground-glass stoppers, such as are used for chemicals.

"You have two alternatives, Captain," went on the speaker, "and, even as a selection of blackguards, we are not so hardened as not to prefer, on our part, the pleasanter of the two. Either you will give us your promise to delay, for a fortnight, any action by your people, so that we may remove certain very valuable effects at our leisure, or you will write a few lines of affectionate farewell to your friends, and—disappear. I may add—permanently."

Montague Chatteris was wrestling with a score of conflicting emotions. But the dominant ones were love and wounded professional pride. The first clamoured for an explanation of Beatrice East's conduct, the other whispered hope and caution.

"Before I answer your—your ultimatum," he said, slowly, "I shall require to be told one thing. What share did Miss Beatrice East play in the comedy which has brought me here?"

The little, elderly man laughed—not ill-humouredly. "Oh," he replied, "Trixy's as innocent as the new born babe. We spotted your flirtation with her, twigged the invitation to join the dance, and sent Tessa, at the right moment, with a message that I was dying. Our plans were vague, according as you offered to play escort or not. Mat being at the ball, in pursuit of a predilection for the genteel, superintended matters, and finally brought Trixy along, while Tess waited with a note for you. But Trixy doesn't belong to our vulgar sphere, my dear Chief, so don't yearn for a cut throat and oblivion."

The person who had been addressed as Mat was chafing visibly. "I'll thank you to leave Trix out of this business, John East," he snarled; "there's been too much of her already."

The forger sneered, politely, "And I'll thank you not to interfere, Mat Foley," he said; "Tessa, ask Beatrice to come in."

Tessa stepped to another door than that by which she had ushered in the chief constable. Flinging it open she called to someone within. A moment later Beatrice East appeared on the threshold—seeing Chatteris she hid her face in her hands.

"Perhaps," remarked John East, chuckling, "you would like a short conversation with my daughter, Captai —it may serve to remind you that you are still young and that life is sweet."

"Curse you, Josh, I'll not stand this!" cried Mat, fiercely, but the forger pushed him back with a strong hand, and the rest of the little gang of reprobates grinned. Beatrice was crossing, with faltering feet, to Chatteris' side.

"Don't—" she murmured, with a convulsive sob—"Don't hate me. Oh, I shall die if they harm you. Why did we ever meet!"

Montague Chatteris caught the fainting figure in his arms. "I know you are innocent, dearest," he answered in the same fashion; "but do you bid me lose my honour? Even a chief constable has his standard of honour—he is one of the soldiers of civilization."

"Then I have killed you," moaned Beatrice; "if only I had never come to Duchester. It was to be near Tessa—mother begged me not to abandon her. Why did I not tell you all? I would have done, only I was afraid of losing you. I love you so. And Mat will not let them spare you—he has always told me I should marry no one but him."

The voice of Joshua East interrupted them.

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"Now, Captain," he said, "time's up; is it to be life and love or death and——"

At the unfinished sentence Beatrice East flung up her hands and swooned.

Montague Chatteris set her in the seat by the table, feeling strangely weak and unmanned himself. As he bent to lay her back, his eye caught a label on one of the bottles that stood like islands among the litter. The label read "Sulphuric Acid."

In a flash he had snatched it up, whipped out the stopper and turned, holding aloft in a wide-mouthed vessel a pint of liquid blindness and agony.

"Keep away!" he cried, "the man who touches me will never see another dawn."

"A thousand furies," hissed the forger, casting his affectation of good temper from him, "he's got the sulphuric!"

The others of the gang had started forward at the Captain's sudden movement—at Joshua East's words they shrank from the chief constable appalled.

Matthew Foley whipped out a revolver; before he could cock it the forger had grasped and wrested it out of his clutch.

"No noise!" he commanded, coolly.

He slipped the weapon into his pocket and drew out a formidable dagger-knife—as he opened it, the blade gleamed in the rays of the lamp.

"You're a bigger man than I, Mat," he said, under his breath; "and besides, Trixy hates me quite enough already."

He motioned to the girl Tess, who came and stood fearlessly, her bright eyes glistening with interest and excitement. Her father tied a handkerchief over them.

"Obey orders, Tess," he said, "and fear nothing."

"Yes, dad," answered the girl, calmly.

"Put your hands behind your back," instructed the forger. Tess did as she was bidden. "Now take hold of her wrists, Mat," pursued Joshua East, with relentless generalship, "there, we'll see if I'm not a good judge of human nature. Remember, she's Trixy's sister, Captain."

Horrified, Chatteris perceived the plan that had so hastily been elaborated. Shielded behind Tessa, Mat Foley, guiding her by his grip upon her wrists, was stealing towards him, the gleaming dagger-knife poised in one clenched hand. Beatrice herself lay insensate where her lover had placed her. Fate was creeping pitilessly onwards in the likeness of a child—the one touch of humanity was the folded handkerchief which was to hide from her the last act in this brief drama. Chatteris dare not fling the acid, and not to fling it was death.

As he stared at the nearing figures he saw, across them, that the door by which he himself had entered began to open stealthily. No one else noticed it, the gang of criminals was lost in a horrible fascination. Chatteris' heart almost ceased to beat as a familiar face appeared in the widening crack. It was the face of Inspector Potts and he looked at that instant the most astounded man in Christendom. The next moment a small and ominous object showed itself in the aperture, there was an explosion, and Mat Foley, relinquishing his grasp of Tessa's arms, pitched over with a cry that was a mixture of shriek and howl. His right arm had been shattered by the bullet.

At the sound the room filled, as if by magic, with men in the uniform of the Duchester police. Montague Chatteris gasped once, and then with the blind instinct of genius, did the most brilliant thing he had ever done in his life.

"Seize those men, Inspector," he commanded, indicating with a dramatic gesture the minor members of the gang, "Joshua East, I charge you to surrender in the King's name."

The words died on his lips.

Joshua East, with a grim smile upon his withered countenance, had plucked from his pocket the revolver wrested so recently out of his colleague's hand, and had discharged it into his temple. For the last time he had evaded the redoubtable Inspector Potts. So far as he was concerned the inspector's otherwise fortunately-calculated raid had failed.

* * * * *

Three months afterwards the following paragraph appeared in the *Duchester Weekly Chronicle*:

> On Wednesday, at the Church of St. James the Less, our gallant and popular Chief Constable espoused Miss Beatrice East, ward of Mrs. Philpot Arnison, of London and Duchester. The crowded edifice bore witness to the esteem which Duchester bears towards Captain Chatteris, whose brilliant exploit at the arrest of "Flash Mat's" gang of forgers is still fresh in our memories. The Captain entered by strategy the head-quarters of the gang and engaged them in conversation while the house was being invaded by the police. All Ducastrians will wish him and his beautiful young bride all possible felicity.

Elsewhere in the same intelligent journal might have been read the announcement:

> Detective-Inspector Potts has been unanimously appointed to be Deputy Chief Constable in place of Mr. Trackitt, resigned. Captain Chatteris paid a high tribute to the merits of the new Deputy Chief, in introducing the latter to the force.

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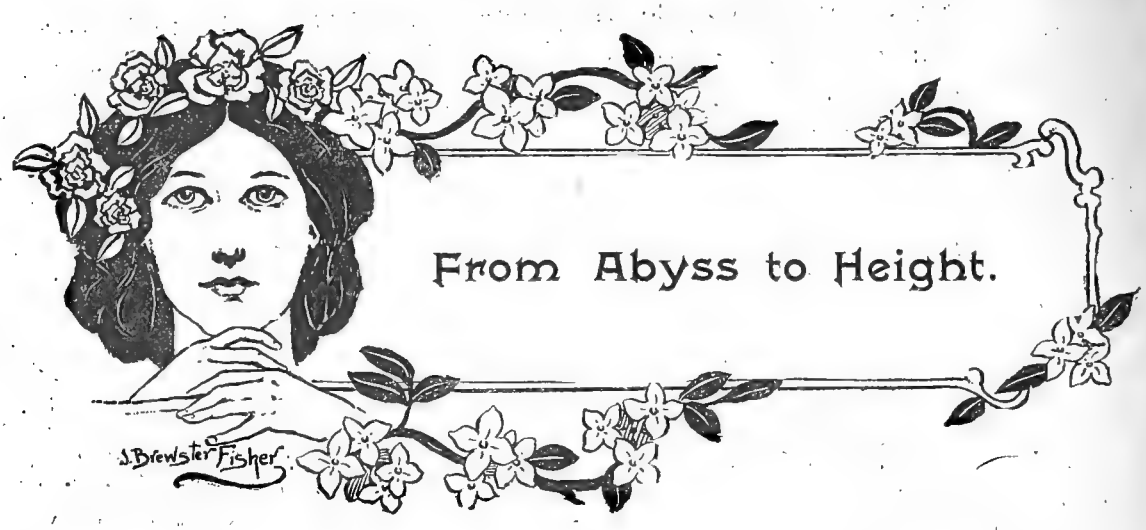

HAMILTON strolled aimlessly down the Strand. He held his head in almost a defiant perpendicularity, and there was a hard, forced smile on his face. Several times he bowed almost mechanically to passers-by and each of them wondered what had happened to Hamilton, that he should be so preoccupied.

The manager of a popular theatre that he passed, happy in the consciousness of a big night's receipts, graciously called to him after he had passed the door, and offered him an admission; and the manager was was much surprised when Hamilton declined it with punctilious courtesy, and walked on with all the dignity of a millionaire—for Hamilton seldom declined such an offer, and it was well-known that he was not a millionaire by any manner of means.

The fact of the matter was that Hamilton was decidedly at outs with the world. He knew that if he were to feel carefully in his pockets he would discover the practically insignificant sum of two-and-sixpence, more or less, and there was a frightful probability that it would prove less. He was also quite well aware, although he tried hard not to pay any attention to the fact, that this insignificant sum was all he possessed in the world.

Hamilton had recently been dropped from the reporting staff of the *Dawn*. There had been a general upheaval in the force (in every healthy newspaper office an upheaval occurs semi-annually or thereabouts) and it was always Hamilton's luck to be one of the upheaved ones.

He wasn't a bad newspaper man in his way. He was well educated, gentlemanly, and addicted to no vice in particular, and careful of his habits. But, as the editor had said of him, "There seemed to be nothing in him."

Newspaper men are divided into two classes—those who are rising in the profession and those who are declining. Few, indeed, are stationary. If there were any such, Hamilton was one of them.

But he was not recognised as being even stationary. Almost unconsciously he was put in the declining class. Occasionally his case would excite a little interest, and he would become the subject of a conversation between a sub editor and his chief, or between two of his own comrades, and they would try to discover just what the matter was with Hamilton; but they never arrived at a satisfactory conclusion.

Some said he was indifferent. Others said he was lazy. All agreed that he was a charming fellow; but if there was to be anyone discharged from the staff, Hamilton was sure to be the very first victim. He had been discharged in turn from every newspaper in town. Some of them had even been so kind as to take him back and discharge him again.

He took it all very calmly. Perhaps it was the fact that he could be discharged without making a scene that made him so often a victim. He never decried the justice of the case of the editor who discharged him. In fact, this was the very secret of Hamilton's ill success. He had absolutely no confidence in himself at all. A newspaper man without confidence is pretty nearly as useless as a fish without fins. And there was nothing in all Hamilton's experience to give him confidence. He had never been trusted with an important case. Consequently he had never accomplished anything. He did very well to copy off the entries in a precinct house register, or to discover the important arrivals at the hotels, but that was about all he could do.

For this very reason, when he was not enjoying a period of prosperity as a staff reporter, he found it next to impossible to get up anything in the shape of a special article, and when he did write a thing and submitted it to an editor, it was ten to one that the editor declined it without reading it, merely because it was "some stuff of Hamilton's."

Hamilton was the son of a rich man—or, at least, the son of a man who had been reputed rich. His early youth had been passed in idleness. He had gone to college, and afterwards had put in a year or more of idleness as a young man about town. Then his father died very suddenly, and the estate of the elder Hamilton was discovered to be bankrupt.

The son found himself thrown suddenly upon the world, with a few suits of clothes as his capital. He knew but one thing. He knew London. He knew it from Piccadilly to Fleet Street, and he knew it in the daytime and the dark. He knew how cold and heartless and selfish it was, and he could have calculated to an hour how long it would take his Society acquaintances

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to forget all about him. Given a particular *débutante* of the preceding season, he could have named the day when she would cut him in the street. There was one —ah! there is always one in a man's life—whom he would have sworn would be faithful to him to the end. She was married to another man within six months!

Her name was Helen Welling. She sent him back a ring one day, without a word of explanation, and he never saw her again. Soon afterwards, Hamilton went to work as a newspaper reporter. It was the only thing he thought he could do. To tell the truth, he didn't care very much whether he did that well or not. All he wanted from the world was some sort of a living, but this he found a very difficult thing to obtain.

He had spent eight years at the work, and he found himself in a worse state than he had been at first. He had no superfluous clothes now. He had pawned them all. He had pawned everything, from time to time, save a handsome ring, with the name "Helen" engraved inside, and he had promised himself that if he were ever forced to pawn that it would be to buy a revolver, with which to end his miserable life. And he secretly hoped that if that day ever came, she would learn what had become of the ring, and what he had done with the money raised on it.

As he walked on, Hamilton was railing at the world for perhaps the first time in his life, and considering whether he had better spend his money for something to eat that evening, or wait until the next morning. He was in awful luck. Everything had gone wrong. His manuscripts had all been rejected, and the one or two friends, who occasionally loaned him a little money when he was hard pushed, had begun to get so cool that he would have starved rather than ask them for another cent.

He decided in favour of putting off the meal until the following morning, though he had eaten nothing that day; for if he was to be able to do anything in the shape of work on the morrow he would need a meal more than he did now. So he cocked his head even more defiantly than ever, and tried very hard to look as though he had just finished a good dinner, washed down by champagne —for he was very sensitive about being pitied. He tried to whistle a gay tune; but, as he walked on, it had degenerated into the most doleful of funeral marches.

He himself had hardly noticed the change. When he did, he turned abruptly from the great artery of the metropolis and walked rapidly towards the east. He heaved a great sigh as he did so, and came as near crying as he ever did since he was a little boy in short trousers. It was ten o'clock at the earliest, and the street was almost empty.

He did not know why he was walking in this way on the half-deserted thoroughfare. He had no intention of going anywhere. It was merely that he did not care to go to his bare, uncomfortable, cold little room. He wanted to be away from anything that reminded him of his poverty. He wanted to be away from himself if he could but get away. He did not know just exactly how it happened—he did not even remember at what intersecting street, but he knew that he was awakened from his pre-occupation by a woman's shrill scream for help.

He ran forward almost mechanically. In the quiet street before him a man was struggling with a woman. A child was standing by, adding its still shriller voice to the outcry of the latter. A cab stood but a few feet away, and Hamilton noticed with disgust that the cabman sat calmly on his seat, watching the struggle, and apparently unwilling to go to the woman's rescue.

Hamilton had not the slightest idea what the trouble was about. He merely knew that a man was apparently trying to choke a woman, and he knew but one duty for a spectator under such circumstances. He ran forward the harder. He was not particularly strong, and he was weaker than usual after a twenty-four hours' fast; but he was brave, and not unskilful with his fists.

He was too late, however. The man saw him coming, and, apparently using strength that he had not at first considered necessary, he threw the woman heavily to the stone pavement, grabbed the child, sprang into a cab, and before Hamilton could collect his scattered ideas, was driving rapidly up the street.

Hamilton had not been a newspaper man for nothing. He knew the whole story at a glance. Husband and wife separated—troubled about the child—both parents claimed it—courts decided in favour of the mother—father resorted to abduction—and so forth. It was an old story. It was happening every day. Sometimes it was published in the paper and sometimes it was not, according to the degree of interest belonging to the previous history of the family and their social position.

Hamilton's impulse was to run to the woman and help her. His reason came to him in a minute, however, and he decided that it would be far better to attempt to follow the abductor. Already people were hurrying from the neighbouring houses, who would take care of the mother, while the cab with the abductor and the child was hurrying up the street. They were not going fast enough to attract the attention of the police. It was still possible to catch up with him if a cab could be secured.

Hamilton felt the two-and-sixpence jingling in his pocket, and his heart sank. He continued to follow the cab up the street, hoping against hope. He mentally anathematized the police, who seemed on this occasion to be one and all asleep. He found himself wishing that by some lucky accident Sullivan would turn up, looking for a fare.

Sullivan was an old cab driver, whom Hamilton had known in the old days, when he was a rich, young bachelor. He had taken a fancy to Sullivan, and the latter had driven him around the town, at all hours of the day and night, until he believed he must have paid him altogether a small fortune.

Even in the days of his waning prosperity he had always gone to the corner frequented by Sullivan, when for any reason he had needed a cab and thought he could afford one. Sullivan, he believed, would have trusted him.

He had been running only a short time, when he heard the cheering rattle of wheels, and presently a hansom hove in sight. Hamilton hailed it, without thinking of the expense and his poverty. It was not Sullivan's, but the cabman was, of course, only too anxious to get a fare, and a moment later, Hamilton, out of breath, was in hot pursuit. The cabby whipped up his horse, and went at the affair as though his heart were in it. Hamilton had discreetly forgotten to mention the amount of money he had in his pocket.

The chase proved to be no easy one, however. It took the occupant of the runaway cab but a few moments to discover that he was being pursued by another cab, and the race became exciting indeed.

In and out of the streets the two cabs turned, hardly varying the distance between them. They were gradually nearing Hyde Park. Hamilton hoped that the abductor would enter the park driveway. There were

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mounted policemen near there, and the race would be ended in a very few minutes.

But the abductor was no such fool. He turned down Grosvenor Place.

"Hopes to get out by way of Victoria," muttered Hamilton, with an exclamation of disgust.

He was almost beginning to fear that his man would get away after all, that he would fail in this adventure, just as he had failed in everything else, and would have but a big cab bill and possibly a lamed horse to pay for as his only souvenir of the case—when he perceived that at last he was gaining.

It took some time to halve the distance between them, but he did it. Now he could begin to see distinctly the form of the driver on the pursued cab as he stood up in his seat and bent over to lash his horse. They had turned into the Buckingham Palace Road. Hamilton stood up and shouted in his excitement. His heart leapt, for he saw that the driver was Sullivan himself.

"Sullivan!" shouted Hamilton.

The cabman turned round and looked at him.

"Sullivan!" he shouted again, "stop that cab, or I'll put you in the police-court!"

There was no mistaking the meaning of his words. There was no mistaking the fact that he could do what he had threatened, and it was quite possible that Sullivan recognised the voice of his pursuer. At any rate the cab in front stopped almost immediately, and Hamilton, flushed with the delicious excitement of success in at least one thing that he had attempted, ran forward and lifted from the cab the unconscious form of a little girl, who had been, to all appearances, slightly chloroformed.

As the cab stopped, the abductor had sprung from it and made his escape. Hamilton, still holding the little girl in his arms, looked at Sullivan in a manner that made the latter turn his eyes in shame to the ground.

"It's some divorce business, Mr. Hamilton," he said. "My fare was the little one's father, and he wanted the child. He said he had a right to it. I didn't mean to be mixed up in anything wrong. You know I wouldn't do anything wrong."

"Sullivan——" Hamilton began.

He was about to administer a lecture preliminary to a further investigation into Sullivan's conduct in the affair, when the little girl showed signs of returning consciousness. It would be far better, he knew, to put off the investigation until he had returned the child to her mother, so he told Sullivan curtly to call at his lodgings the following morning on pain of being reported to the police, and, still holding the child in his arms, got into a hansom and started back.

He rather liked the position in which he found himself now. Every man has something in his nature that makes him like to be considered a protector of the weak, and the way the child nestled up to him in the cab and clasped his arm, as though she had absolute confidence in his protection, was to Hamilton as delightful a thing as had happened to him in a long time. He found himself wondering how long it had been since he had held a child in his arms before, and found that it had been at least ten years. He felt proud of himself, and forgot all about his hunger and the limited amount of money in his pocket.

"You are not going to take me to papa, are you?" said the child.

"No," said Hamilton. "I'm going to take you to the police-station where they will take care of you till your mother comes for you."

"Oh, please don't," the child exclaimed, bursting unexpectedly into tears, "please don't—please don't."

Just how to get out of this interesting predicament Hamilton did not know. He knew that it was his duty to take the child to the police-station. But he also knew that she would be very much frightened, and he was beginning to feel that a police-station was no place for her.

He looked down at her great upturned eyes. He noted the rich dress in which she was clad, and the jewellery on her arms and about her throat. One of the little diamonds in her locket that hung from her necklace would have made him feel rich. He didn't care much, any way.

"All right," he said finally. "I'll promise not to take you to the police-station. Tell me what your name is."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," she said, "but I can't tell you what my name is."

"You can't?" he repeated amazed.

"No, mamma made me promise never to tell anyone. I don't know what my name is, and I don't know you."

Hamilton frowned a little. He rather felt that he had a right to know. The child was a little difficult, with her refusal to lose sight of her mother's command. Such instructions had undoubtedly been given her to prevent the very attempt that had been made that night to carry her off, however, and he couldn't help admiring the child's unquestioning obedience to her mother.

"Well," he said, "tell me where you live, and I'll take you straight home."

She bent her head a little in thought a moment, and frowned.

"I live in a long street near a big church—that is, mamma and I live there now. It's Grandpa's, you know, and we have just come to live with him. I don't know the name of the street. Mamma never lets me go out alone, you know."

Hamilton looked puzzled. The adventure was becoming more unusual every moment.

"Well," he said, "if you won't tell me your name, and can't tell me where you live, I'll have to take you to the police-station."

"But you promised not to," she cried with a shudder.

He looked into her great trusting eyes again. He could not disappoint such confidence as that.

"How do you expect to get back to your mother?" he asked, talking to her quite seriously, as he would have talked to a mature woman.

"Oh," she answered confidently, "mamma will come for me. She always told me that if I were taken away from her she would come for me as soon as she could."

"But," continued the distracted Hamilton, "how is she going to know where you are?"

"Oh! she'll find out some way or other," replied the little girl. "I'm sure she will."

He drove to his own home. He carried her in his arms to his own bare room, and he sat down on a chair and tried to think. It was almost ludicrous. The cabby was waiting below for his money. The child would need attention. He was a law breaker himself in not taking the child to the police, and he would have to break his pledged word to the child if he did.

He tried to think what to. She could not remain there with him, and there was no one to whom he could take her at that time of night.

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In the meantime she gazed at him quite contentedly from a seat on his bed. He was weak and very hungry. No doubt she was the same. He thought of the ring. Perhaps he might get enough on it to pay the cabby, get them something to eat, and still leave enough to buy what he had always intended to buy with the money it had brought.

He went to a worn old trunk, and after rummaging around in it, fished out at length a plush jewel case. He opened it, took out a ring, and placed it sighing on the table. The child reached over and picked it up.

"Oh! that is like mamma's ring," she exclaimed.

He looked at her a moment, and said, quickly:

"Tell me your name and I will give it to you."

She hesitated a moment.

It was a temptation—too great a temptation.

"Helen Brewer," she faltered.

"My Heaven!" exclaimed Hamilton.

He looked at her for a moment, and then he knew—he knew that the girl before him was the daughter of the woman he had once loved.

* * * * *

There was an air of suppressed excitement among the staff of the *Dawn* that night.

Every available newspaper man in town had been pressed into service, and every paper was bent on getting a beat on all the other papers in relation to a sensational abduction case that occurred but a few hours before under the very eyes of the police.

It was a matter concerning people of high social standing.

There had been an unfortunate marriage. The husband had been at fault, and the wife had obtained a divorce together with the custody of the child. The husband had threatened to steal the child, and after several failures had succeeded in doing so. All London was talking of the affair.

The father had made good his escape with the child, and no trace could be discovered of his whereabouts.

One o'clock had come and gone, and not a word had been learnt except the short story of the mother. The editor of the *Dawn* sat at his desk, tapping impatiently on it with his pencil.

Would his men ever come in with any news? Had any of the other newspapers found out something that he did not know? It might be worth his situation to be beaten.

He was excited and miserable when the door was quickly opened, and Hamilton, pale-faced and weary, entered.

"You haven't the slightest newspaper instinct in your make up, Hamilton," said the editor, snappishly. "We have a big case on hand, and if you had been round I could have given you something to do. Of course you were not. You come round when there is nothing to do, and loaf when there is something important. I don't understand you at all."

It is very probable that Hamilton did not hear a word that had been said, however, for he sank wearily into a chair, and said:

"I'm in a peck of trouble, Kendrick, and you must help me out of it."

"Humph," said Kendrick.

"I've got a child downstairs in a cab. She's the daughter of Mrs. Brewer—you know the one, used to be a Miss Welling, daughter of the rich Welling——"

The editor did not quite faint. He began breathing freely again.

Hamilton continued:

"There has been some trouble in the family—divorce, you know—and the father tried to steal the child. I rescued her from him. I want you to detail one man—please do—to take the child back to her mother. I can't do it. There used to be something between us, you know, in the old days, and I don't want her to know it was I. I've got a cabman down there to whom I owe at least a sovereign. You must lend me that much, or he'll have me arrested. I'm all broken up, Kendrick. Don't refuse—please don't!"

The editor had quite regained his speech. But he did not say much.

"You—you—of all men!"

That was as much as he could say at the time.

* * * * *

Hamilton did not rise till noon the next day. He had confused memories of the preceding night. There was something about a child in them, and something about the woman he loved.

It seemed to him that he had been told that he was again on the staff of the *Dawn*; and indeed that he might consider he had never been discharged, and might draw his back pay just as though he had been at work all the time.

He couldn't believe this was all true until he had put his hand into his pocket, and discovered there a generous roll of notes. He did remember eating a big supper, however, late in the night, at which, for some strange reason or other, he had been a good deal lionized.

But something that was given him while he was getting ready for breakfast brought back to him a vivid remembrance of all the events of the previous evening. It was a note in a woman's handwriting, and the significance of its contents may be gathered from their effect upon Hamilton.

For when he lifted his eyes from the written page, there gleamed in them a new and transfiguring brightness of hope—the hope of recovering a happiness that had been as dead to him for years.

T. W. H.

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CHAPTER X.

Historical Mistakes.

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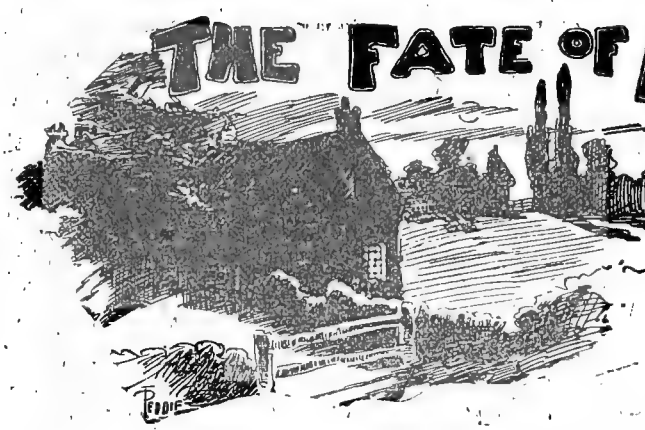

THE FATE OF MICHAEL STANDRIDGE

By HEADON HILL.

Author of "The Peril of the Prince," "Seaward for the Foe," "Guilty Gold," etc.

SUMMARY.

THE steamship *Trojan* is homeward bound from the Cape. On board is Michael Standridge, who is returning to England from the Kimberley diamond fields, in possession of the "Kimberley Elephant," the largest diamond found in the colony. On the ship is his half-brother, Simon Hoathley. On the way up the English Channel the latter steals into the miner's cabin with the intention of murdering him and obtaining possession of the diamond. The miner, however, is on the alert, and presents a pistol at the intruder's head.

Michael sells his diamond for £20,000 to Messrs. Strauss and Lightfoot, whose clerk, Swinley Tasker, he discovers in an attempt to rob him of £35. Michael reads Tasker a lecture, kicks him, and departs—having made an enemy of this rascal. Reading is where Michael expects to find news of his daughter, and he purchases Kennett's Cross, a dilapidated farmhouse in the neighbourhood, this house meeting his requirements by being very secluded, and on a clay soil suitable for brickmaking.

He spends his time in making bricks, and as each batch is made he draws out from the bank a thousand pounds in gold, until at length his balance is quite low. One day Michael is thrown out of his pony-trap, and enters a house for assistance. Here he finds Cuthbert Blakesley, the cashier at the bank, and two ladies, and recognises in the younger one, to whom Cuthbert is engaged to be married, a strong resemblance to his wife.

Mrs. Bonfield is able to prove that Marion is Michael's daughter, and he promises to acquaint her shortly with the secret of Kennett's Cross. A few weeks later Marion and Cuthbert are sitting in the garden, waiting for her father, when a constable enters and arrests Cuthbert on the charge of murdering Michael.

At the inquest which follows strong evidence against Cuthbert is given. The latter also makes a statement. The verdict is one of "Wilful murder against Cuthbert Blakesley."

In order to clear his name, Marion lives at Kennett's Cross, and consults Zambra, the famous detective. The latter makes some startling discoveries.

CHAPTER X. (*continued*).

"THAT was the germ from which sprang my first idea of the prisoner's innocence, when I knew absolutely nothing about him or about his surroundings, except that he was a bank cashier, and therefore presumably a man of average intelligence Were he ever so morally capable of doing what he was charged with he would never have been such a fool to put forward such a defence Well, going on from that thesis, I started in my mental argument with the cat story as an accepted truth, and my first task was to consider if the incident was merely a mad freak of chance, or whether if it had a deeper significance—a close relation to the tragedy of Friday night. Here, too, I was able to still more strongly fortify the case for Mr. Blakesly, which I was building up in my mind, actuated then, you will remember, by purely disinterested motives."

Zambra had been walking up and down the room, but here he paused in his walk and looked at Marion.

"You are a brave girl," he said kindly; "but do you think that you are strong enough to listen to my notion of the foul and treacherous means by which your father met his death? It is not description, remember—only theory—though I am very much out of my reckoning, if it does not turn out more than fancy."

"Go on, please," said Marion; "nothing can alter what has happened and we have to save the living."

Zambra resumed his walk, and proceeded:

"This, then, is what I imagine occurred. Some person or persons—from what I have seen since I came to this house I think there was only one implicated—knew of Mr. Standridge's supposed accumulation of gold coin in a strong room or vault of his own manufacture, and determined to take possession of it. Your father being, as I understand, a man of powerful physique, he (or they) could only hope to succeed by killing him first. But this was difficult, because of the precaution Mr. Standridge was known to take in safeguarding himself and his property. The criminal, therefore, devised a scheme of such devilish ingenuity that it would not only gain for him secret access to this house, but would cause an innocent man to be suspected as the literally red-handed perpetrator. I believe that Cuthbert Blakesly was brought to the place by means of a trick, and I believe that the kitten was purposely placed in a trap and in a lacerated condition at the garden gate, in order to serve the double end of getting the bloodstains upon Blakesly's clothes, and of allowing the murderer to slip into the house unseen.

"This is what I imagine happened. The criminal, who must have been listening outside this window during Blakesly's call, ascertained by that means when the latter was about to take his leave. Just as your father and Blakesly approached the front door he must have thrust the kitten which he had brought into the jaws of the steel trap, causing it to squeal. Placing it by the gate, he then retreated swiftly to the rear of the laurel bush close to the front door, and while Mr. Standridge and his visitor were down at the gate examining the wounded animal, slipped into the house. The rest was easy. Hiding behind the door, he stabbed your father in the back when he entered. The cat and the trap were, I believe, removed by the murderer to give the lie to the defence he knew would be made by Blakesly.

"You noticed that my first act on arrival was to look for signs, in support of my theory, at the corners of the house at one of which I had previously thought the murderer might have been concealed while the two were talking at the door. These signs I eventually found under the laurel bush, in such a position that they could not have been caused by the police-admitted tramplers at the inquest. The footmarks of some person who had pressed himself among the foliage of the tree, thereby breaking several twigs, were shown up in striking contrast by means of the shower which you have told me of. A few drops percolated through the leaves, and fell on the footmarks, showing

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that the latter were made *before* the rain came, whereas the tracks of the mob around are easily distinguishable as having been made by the *after* shower."

"You have done wonders, already, Mr. Zambra," said Marion, her eyes sparkling with excitement; "but there are two points which strike me as wanting explanation; the evidence of the analyst as to the *human* blood on the bell, and the knowledge evinced by the murderer about the position of the hidden key."

"Your questions show that you have a real grasp of the situation," said the detective, allowing himself to relax into a genial smile. "Would that I always had such clients. As to the blood spot on the bell, I do not attach so very much importance to it, as if my theory is correct, and I am able to prove a trick, that might easily have been part of it—in common language a 'plant.' I quite admit, though, that in the event of my failure to do this, the blood spot is likely to press hard on the prisoner. In the matter of the key and the missing money, I confess myself puzzled as yet, though it is quite possible that before I leave the house something may transpire to shed light on them.

"Next to what I call the 'cat story,' it was this hidden key, found apparently by the police untouched in its hiding-place, that convinced me of Mr Blakesly's innocence. Surely after commiting the double crime and effecting his purpose, he would never have taken the trouble to go upstairs and fasten the key down in the floor again. But then, this objection remains in the case of anyone else and yet, with the exception of Mr. Oakley and his cashier, no one had a chance of knowing where the key was. It is just possible there may have been a duplicate used, but I think not. Nobody but the maker of the door could have made a key to fit the lock, and with all their faults, the police would have discovered if that were so. I shall, of course, satisfy myself on the point independently."

Zambra paused, and coming to the table, took up the envelope. "If I am not greviously mistaken," he said, "the clue to the mystery lies hidden in this find of yours. *Prima facie* it is, of course, good evidence—that is, good police evidence—against Mr. Blakesly with that stain on it. But how did it come in the tobacco-jar? Suppose Blakesly were guilty, would he have taken the trouble to preserve such a damning witness against himself by placing it where it ought to have been found by the police? It is a mystery how it did come there, but I am very sure it was not put there by the prisoner. That being so, someone else must have been there that night, and it is that someone else I have to discover. Perhaps this envelope will lead to him."

"How can that be possible?" said Marion.

"Look at the envelope closely. Do you not see any peculiarities in it?"

"Nothing, but the stain."

Zambra smiled.

"That envelope," he said, "has been twice sent through the post—once as an inclosure to be reposted, and the second time when it was posted at Wilmington to Mr. Blakesly See the creased fold across the centre; and here, by the aid of the magnifying glass, I see the imprint of the office stamp which has gone through the inclosing envelope. There is no ink on it, of course, and it is far too indistinct to be legible, but there is the clue as to where this forgery—for it is a forgery—started from. It was posted by someone lying up in the neighbourhood, to be used in the scheme for getting Mr. Blakesly out here that night."

"But if the stamp is illegible how can it serve us?" exclaimed Marion.

"I shall photograph the envelope," said Zambra. "It is quite likely that what is hidden there will yield to the searchlight of the lens."

CHAPTER XI.

THE HIDDEN POSTMARK.

As Zambra spoke he stooped and picked up from the floor a small black bag which he had brought with him. This he placed on the table, and, quickly undoing the fastenings disclosed to Marion's interested gaze a neatly packed assortment of shining apparatus and coils of the finest wire. There were two or three miniature cameras, at the most three or four inches square, and furnished with tiny glittering lenses no bigger than a shilling; there was a small electric battery, with its jar charged and ready for use; quite a collection of glass-stoppered ounce bottles were stowed away in the quilted lining; while the odd corners were filled up with an *omnium gatherum* comprising pick-locks, skeleton keys, and even surgical instruments. In the centre of the bag was a camera slightly larger than the others, and capable of taking "quarter-plate" negatives, yet so constructed as to fold up into the smallest possible space.

It was this last apparatus that Zambra took from its receptacle, saying as he did so:

"This bag, you see, contains the little scientific specialities which have done so much good work for me. One like it ought to be the inseparable companion of every detective, but your official spy is far too bumptious an individual to prefer the boundless light of science to his own limited intelligence."

"It was with one of these that you cleared up the mystery of 'The Arab Javelin,' was it not?" said Marion. "It was through reading that case I thought of you."

"Yes, with one of those silent witnesses there," replied Zambra, pointing to the bag. "It is an automatic repeating camera which can be placed so as to record the secret actions of persons when they are quite alone, and when it is not possible to set human eyes to watch them. I may have to use it before this case is ended, but we must find our 'suspect' first. Perhaps this apparatus will show us where to look for him."

He had clamped the quarter-plate camera on to the back of a chair, and was pinning the envelope to the top rail of another chair, which he arranged so that the light from the window fell full upon it. This done, he placed the chair with the camera opposite and sharply focussed the envelope, upon which nothing was visible but the address, the cancelled postage stamp, and the Wilmington postmark. The stain and the Reading delivery postmark were on the reverse or flap side. Then he inserted a dark slide, and, removing the cap, gave an exposure of thirty seconds, after which he subjected the other side of the envelope to a precisely similar operation.

"And now if there is a roomy cupboard in the house which I can use as a dark room," said Zambra, "we shall soon know all that the camera can tell us. Any place without a window will do."

Marion conducted him to one of the dark store rooms behind the dairy, and, having complied with his request for some fresh water, left him to develop the films by the light of a portable ruby lamp. In about twenty minutes Zambra re-entered the sitting-room holding the finished films in his hands His brows were knit, and so entirely was he absorbed in the business of the moment that for the first time during his visit he forgot to be courteous. Disregarding Marion's inquiry he walked straight to the window, and with his magnifying glass subjected one of the negatives to a prolonged scrutiny. For a long time he stood there searching the transparent film—equally available as positive or negative first in one light, then in another, holding it at different distances, and twisting it this way and that. Suddenly he held it motionless, keeping the magnifier in the same position for quite a couple of minutes, while the abstracted look on his face gradually cleared to one of the keenest comprehension. Finally, with a smile that spoke of triumph, he turned apologetically to Marion.

"Forgive my pre-occupation," he said, "but it has been to some purpose. Kindly step here a moment and tell me what you make of this."

Zambra held the film and the magnifier while Marion looked. Her gaze being thus directed to the right spot, she had no difficulty in seeing that the lens had reproduced in

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a visible form inequalities in the paper which had been invisible in the envelope itself. Near the right hand edge, and close to the clear reproduction of the right Wilmington postmark, was a faint circle, inclosing certain letters which bore out Zambra's theory that the postmark of an outside envelope had left its inkless impression on the one sent to Cuthbert. But the letters themselves were more difficult to decipher.

"I can make out a W and an O, then there is a blank followed by a C and E and an S, then another short blank, and an E and an R. Is it possible that it is Worcester?" asked Marion.

"Good, so far as it goes," said Zambra, "but try again. Can you make nothing more of it?"

Again Marion concentrated her eyes on the shadowy film, with the result that a little further on she was able to distinguish the letters A R K, and in the centre of the circle a Y and figures 7 and 2, the latter evidently part of the date May 7th, 1892. Zambra agreed with her as to the date, but shook his head at her suggestion that the letters A R K referred to the number of the collection.

"The alphabetical sign of the collection would be over the date in the centre, I think I can see traces of it," he said. "But your reading confirms mine in every respect. The letters A R K are part of the name of the place. It is only because you have probably never heard of it that you are unable to supply the missing letters. The place where we have to look for a further clue to your father's murderer is Worcester Park, nowhere near the town of that name, but a suburban neighbourhood in Surrey, lying between Wimbledon and Cheam, and some twelve miles from Waterloo. It is quite a small place inhabited chiefly by clerks and others engaged in business in London."

"I cannot understand it," said Marion. "What connection can there be between a London suburb and my father? He only returned from the Cape last year after many years absence, and he settled here almost immediately. In the week during which I knew him he certainly never mentioned the name. It almost seems as if Uncle Simon were right, and that it was a London burglar who is guilty of my poor father's blood."

Zambra came and seated himself opposite Marion.

"This brings us to another stage in the inquiry," he said. "I gathered the general outlines of your rather romantic history from the newspapers, how your father only found you a week before his death, and how you had been brought up by a stranger; but can you tell me nothing more than that—not about your own, but about your father's past career, his family, and his curious adoption of another name? You see our only clue, so far as it goes, suggests that somewhere in this little suburban resort, Worcester Park, there is, or was, an individual so well acquainted with Mr. Standridge's handwriting that he was able to forge a letter from him and send it down to a confederate who must have been then resident at Reading—the other film plainly shows the Reading post-mark—to be used in the double plot against your father and Mr. Blakesly. It is absolutely essential that I should be able to review every possible combination in your father's life. I understand that you had no relative in these parts, but you mentioned an uncle just now. Could he help us in tracing out the past do you think?"

Marion produced the card inscribed with the address, "Morton, Delaval Rectory, Yorkshire," explaining that her uncle was to be in London for some time, and that letters sent to his home would not reach him at present.

Zambra copied the address into his pocket-book, and rather abruptly changed the subject by proposing that he should now look over the house, more especially the hole in the flooring where the key had been hidden, and lastly, the strong-room itself.

"In criminal investigation," he explained, "it is one of my maxims to approach the various details in the same order as that likely to have been observed by the guilty party. A detective ought to see eye to eye with his quarry, and by this method one has more chance of obtaining an identical point of view."

Marion conducted Zambra from room to room, and, as she did so, she could not help noticing how silent he had become now that he was embarked on the more practical part of his work. He asked no questions, but went about methodically examining every article and every nook and cranny, even to the extent of sounding walls and peering up chimneys. Thus quietly and thoroughly, but without incident, the search was conducted through the whole of the ground and first floor till they came to the chamber where the key had been hidden.

As for herself, Marion was obliged to confess complete ignorance except that her father had been separated from her mother who had long been dead. Briefly describing Uncle Simon's visit, and the reason for his staying the night, she expressed her doubts of his being of any use to the inquiry. He was a country clergyman in poor health, and he had not seen or heard of his brother since their boyhood till he read of the tragedy in a newspaper. She supposed, however, that he would be ready and able to speak of those early days.

Zambra listened with grave interest.

"I saw the gentleman in the lane this morning," he said musingly, adding, with apparent irrelevance. "You have been too busy to dust your mantelpiece this morning, I think, Miss Standridge?"

Marion, wondering, admitted that such was the case.

"Pray don't apologize," continued Zambra. "This dust is highly interesting, and tells me that your uncle applied himself during the night just nine times to a pint flask which he kept on the mantelpiece; but that by the way. It is well you have given me his address, in case I want to communicate with him, though, from what you say, his information is not likely to be valuable."

At first sight there was nothing in the room to divert attention from the yawning hole and the plank lying beside it, and Zambra was making his way to this point when, with a short exclamation, he threw himself on his knees, and, taking out a penknife, carefully removed a small round speck from the floor. The substance he transferred to an empty pill-box, which he placed in his pocket still without comment. Humouring his mood, Marion forbore to question him, and stood looking on in silence while he turned his attention to the hole and the plank. This latter the police had forcibly levered up without waiting to extract the nails, which, bent and jagged, were still sticking from it in all directions. In examining and feeling the nails Zambra spent a good ten minutes, and five more in probing, searching the gap in the flooring. At length he turned to Marion.

"We are getting on very well," he said. "The state of this flooring distinctly contradicts the police theory that Mr. Blakesly took the key from its hiding-place and replaced it after robbing the strong-room. That removes the weight of the evidence as to the exclusive knowledge about the key. Whether you would get a jury to believe what I *know* to be a fact is another thing, but I am assured that my view is correct."

"And that is?"

"That neither Mr. Blakesly *nor anyone else* robbed the strong-room at all," was the startling reply; "certainly not by a key procured from this hole. See here," he continued, taking up the plank, "this has been wrenched up by the police, but there are no traces of the nails having been extracted and hammered in again. Had that been so there would have been infallible traces of the tool which removed the nails, and there would have been a certain looseness about them, whereas they are so firmly embedded in the wood as when they were first driven home. I am convinced that this plank has only been raised once since your father fastened it down, and that was when it was levered up, all standing, by the police. Let us get down

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to the strong-room now, and then I shall be able to give you my full opinion so far as Kennett's Cross is concerned."

The door under the stairs leading to the cellar had no lock, a fact duly noted by Zambra, and it opened directly on to a flight of steep stone steps running straight down into the blackness below. At Zambra's request Marion had brought a candle from the sitting-room, and by its flickering light they descended, the detective piloting the way over the inequalities of the worn and slippery stones. The air struck chill and mouldy, and not a ray of daylight penetrated beyond the foot of the stairs. Along each side of the cellar were rows of decaying bins, with the woodwork in every stage of mild rottenness, and, in many cases, completely fallen away.

And there at the further end, in striking contrast to the dank and deserted aspect of the rest, was the smart new brickwork, with its heavy iron door in the centre, which had furnished Michael Standridge with employment during the last months of his eventful life.

There was no hurry in anything that Zambra did, and before using the complicated key which Marion had given him he studied the exterior of the strong-room with all his customary keen concentration.

Even the cobwebbed bins and shelves at this end of the cellar came in for a share of his scrutiny. Peering here, there, and everywhere, he showed himself desirous of thoroughly mastering the approaches to the strong-room before entering it. Fixed to the bin nearest the iron door there was an old wooden bracket.

It was after a prolonged examination of the surface of the bracket that Zambra suddenly thrust the candle he was carrying into Marion's hands, and took from his pocket the pill box which he had produced in the bedroom.

Then to Marion's amazement, he detached a piece of the grease that was guttering down the side of the candle, and compared it with the contents of the box. Looking up sharply, he asked:

"You have not been in the room where the key was found after dark—with a candle, I mean?"

"No, indeed," said Marion. "It is as much as my nerves will stand to go upstairs to my own room without wandering about the house at night."

"Where was this candle kept last night?"

"It was in the sitting-room," replied Marion.

"Exactly, where your uncle spent the night, or rather part of it, for, if I am not very much mistaken, another detective has been going over precisely the ground we have covered to-day, and that detective is no less a person than your reverend uncle Here on this bracket is the shape of the bottom of his flask, imprinted in the dust, just as on the mantelpiece upstairs. And this grease spot which I found on the floor in the bedroom is of the same substance as your candle. By the way, did you buy these candles yourself or find them in the house?"

"I bought them in Wilmington yesterday morning," said Marion.

"That settles it, then," said Zambra decisively. "I thought the spot was a fresh one, and could not have been spilt on the night of the murder. Your worthy uncle has been smitten with a curiosity to go the rounds himself in the dead of the night to see what he could discover on his own account. He must have been sufficiently recovered to do this, you see, though not well enough to be long separated from his flask. And he said not a word to you about his nocturnal travels."

"No," said Marion. "He expressed great anxiety to be of use to me, and put many questions about the missing money and where it could have been hidden by the criminal, but he did not even ask to be shown over the house. Perhaps what you say accounts for what I heard and saw during the night," and she described the banging of the distant door, and the light, suddenly extinguished, that struggled up the stairs from below.

Zambra made no comment, but inserted the key in the iron door and entered the strong-room. The actual space inclosed was only about nine feet by six, much of the area cut off from the cellar being occupied by the massive brickwork lining which Michael had built against the foundation walls of the house. The brickwork rose in the form of an archway, thus forming a vaulted roof of great thickness. The floor, too, was of new bricks closely cemented together; indeed, the only object about the chamber not so constructed was the wooden shelf running across the far end on which the police had found the empty paper gold bags. These had been removed to be produced in evidence.

"I expect Messrs. Gunning and Dimmock's rural myrmidons have been here in such force that they would have destroyed any traces had such ever existed here," said Zambra, after a cursory glance round the gloomy recess. "However," he continued, "there may be a lesson to be learnt here that was not dreamt of in their philosophy," and, taking a foot-rule from his pocket, he proceeded to measure the height and thickness of the walls, sounding them now and again, and repeating the process of the flooring. This done he devoted himself to a long examination of the intricate lock and of the key, nodding in a confirmatory way as the impregnable nature of Michael's stronghold became more apparent to him.

"Come, Miss Standridge," he said at length, "let us get upstairs again to daylight and to work, for I do not think Kennett's Cross has anything more to tell me, and I have one or two inquiries to make in Reading before I catch the 4.50 back to town."

Zambra commenced repacking his bag the moment they reached the sitting-room, and Marion began to fear that he was about to take his leave without enlightening her. But she was mistaken, for the moment the last strap was buckled he said:

"Let us sit down for a little, while I run over the salient points of the case as it stands now. To begin with, my visit has more than confirmed me in my first theory as to how the murder was committed. The footmarks under the laurel bush, and the hidden postmark on the forwarded letter, are quite convincing that there has been foul play of a deeper kind than that implied in the charge against Mr. Cuthbert Blakesly. But I am convinced of something more. I do not believe that a robbery has been committed at all. We both of us put Mr. Blakesly out of the question. Very well, then; no one else would have had the knowledge to go straight to the hole in the floor to get the key after committing the murder, and the state of the plank bears out my idea that it had not been tampered with. We are, therefore, reduced to the supposition that the person who robbed the strong-room must have done so by means either of manipulating the lock or using a duplicate key. An inspection of the lock and of the key has now put this supposition out of court, and I believe that the murderer of your father, who probably expected to find the key on his person, had to go empty away."

"But the missing money," put in Marion; "if it was not taken how do you account for its not being there? My father can hardly have spent it in those few weeks. Besides, he would not have taken all those precautions—have built a strong-room like that—to contain nothing."

"Very true," replied Zambra, "and what is the natural deduction from that? Why, that your father, apprehending some attempt of this kind, took a still greater precaution and concealed the money, not on the open shelf in the strong-room, but bricked up in the walls or in the flooring. Everything points to a great fear on your father's part of some person or persons unknown, whom it is now my duty to find. Look at the elaborate bolts on the front door, and in your bedroom where he slept. Call to mind the hesitation he showed to open the door when Mr. Blakesly came that night, refusing to do so till he had looked from the upper window. Remember his unaccount-

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able change of name, his eccentric desire to have his property actually under his own thumb, and his reluctance to reveal even to you some mysterious 'secret.' I repeat that Mr. Standridge had an ever present dread that someone would deprive him of his means of providing for you should he ever—as he happily did—find you. With your permission I propose to pull down the strong-room and test my theory."

"I do not mind in the least if it will throw any light on the matter," said Marion; "only please remember that with me the first consideration is the finding of the real murderer—not the discovery of the money. All that might go and welcome if only Mr. Blakesly's character were cleared."

"The whole case is bound up together," said Zambra; "and if we clear up part of it, we are nearer to clearing up the whole. Then I shall send down a trusty man to-morrow morning whom I employ on such occasions, and we will soon have the strong-room to pieces. It will be better than employing a local bricklayer, who might talk. It is possible that I may be down again to-morrow myself, though it depends on the progress I make in my inquiries. I have to work upon the origin of the hidden postmark, and I propose to see the principal diamond brokers in Hatton Garden. Your father hinted to you that he made his money at the Cape in that line, and it is just possible that some of these gentry have had dealings with him. And if in the meanwhile you hear from or see your uncle, wire me at once. Apart from any information he can give, I am curious to see a gentleman of such keen detective instincts. I should like to compare notes with him and see if his views coincide with my own. By the way, did you tell him of my expected arrival?"

Marion explained that she had thought it best not to do so.

"Quite right," said Zambra, plainly delighted at his client's discretion; "and I, too, not knowing who he might be, took the liberty of masking myself behind the edge this morning, when I saw him leave your gate. And now, good-bye, Miss Standridge; you will see me again very soon—with good news, I trust. If my man finds anything to-morrow he will see it to a place of safety on your behalf. Again, good-bye."

He took his departure by the rear of the house, so that he might have an opportunity of seeing the brickfield and the remains of Michael's out-door operations. Thence he made his way across an intervening field to the high road, where he found the fly he had ordered waiting for him, according to instructions, half-a-mile from the cross roads. He had walked out in the cool of the morning, and had taken this precaution on his return to avoid attracting notice.

In Reading Zambra called on the second-hand dealer who had supplied the iron door, and found, as he had expected, that there was only one key in existence that would fit the lock, the one that had been sold with it to Mr. Standridge. He reached the station just in time to fling himself into an unoccupied carriage of the London train.

"What a brave girl it is!" he said to himself as he let down the window and settled in a corner seat, "and what is better, no fuss or excitement about her, a model client in every way. I don't like her being alone in that horrible house though. I must try and get her out of it somehow next time. Supposing the individual I am looking for should pay me the compliment to adopt my theory and go back for a second hunt for that silly old man's gold! Another and still more deplorable crime might follow. That disreputable looking uncle, too; it is quite on the cards that his nocturnal prowl may have had a mercenary origin," he exclaimed, as a sudden thought struck him. "I never forget a face, and I will swear that the man I saw in the lane this morning is the same whom I saw foregathering with another raffish-looking customer in the box-lounge at the Royal last Saturday. It was on the cards that he may not have heard of the murder, but a clergyman at a music-hall on the day after his brother's death is, to say the least of it, an all-round anomaly. Yes, it is even possible that he may know more of Kennett's Cross than he ought to. It is worth looking into, anyhow. I will send Lewis down to Morton Delaval by the night mail to make a few inquiries about our reverend friend with the eccentric eye. My own programme must be an hour or two among the diamond brokers in the morning, and then, failing anything fresh, a steady hunt through these suburban preserves we wot of. One thing is very certain—Michael Standridge must have made some peculiar acquaintances at some period of his life."

Thus it was that about half-past eleven the next morning Zambra walked into the offices of Strauss and Lightfoot, in Hatton Garden. The outer room was empty, but at the sound of his entry a stout German gentleman emerged from the private sanctum and asked his business.

"Can you tell me," said Zambra, politely—he had asked the same question half-a-dozen times already—"can you tell me if your firm has had any transactions—considerable transactions, I should imagine — with a person named Wilson or Stanbridge?"

"Ach! my friend, you are of the police, I see," said the German gentleman, mopping his brow. "Beople are always of the police when they ask after oder beoples with two names. I do not remember, but I will the books examine."

Mr. Strauss referred to a weighty ledger on the desk and ran his finger down the index.

"Here we are," he said; "you are in luck Mr. Policeman. Mr. Wilson is the agent who sold us the big Cape diamond last year. I forgot the name for little whiles, but now I remember. Yes, on June 15th, 1891, Mr. Thomas Wilson sold to Strauss and Lightfoot diamonds for £20,380, and he got the cash. I did not the business do myself, so I forgot."

"Can you tell me nothing of his appearance, or what accounts he gave of himself?" asked Zambra. "If not, perhaps your partner could give some information?"

"Alas! my friend, poor Lightfoot, is no longer my partner; he died last Christmas, to my sorrow, and I am alone in the business, My clerk may have seen this gentleman, but, unfortunately, he is at home for two days ill. He writes to-day he may not come for a week. It is a very great nuisance; no partner no clerk."

"So far as I am concerned," said Zambra, "if I can go and see your clerk it will come to the same thing. He may not be too ill to give me five minutes' conversation, and the matter is very important. Would you favour me with his address?"

"Certainly, my friend," said Strauss, writing on a slip of paper, "and tell him from me that if he does not come back soon he the sack will get. There is the address—'*Number* 2, *Longfellow Road, Worcester Park.*'"

(*To be continued.*)

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Short Stories That . . . . . Make You Laugh.

We devote every week space in *Short Stories* to pithy, humorous anecdotes similar to those which appear in these columns. A prize of £1 1s. will be sent to the reader who submits the best storyette this week, and a Stereoscope to each of those whose attempts are used. The anecdotes may be either original or selected; in the latter case, the source MUST be stated. Attempts must reach the Storyette Editor, *Short Stories* Office, Henrietta Street, Strand, London, W.C., by Monday, May 27th. Post-cards only, please. The prize of One Guinea has been awarded this week to Mr. E. Fry, 45 Upcott Street, Canterbury Road, Old Kent Road, Hatcham, S.E., whose contribution is denoted by a star thus.*

SWEET: "I have found this a very cold world." Sours: "That so? It must be a comfort to you to anticipate the next."

BLOOMER (to ragged urchin): "Your parents left you something when they died, did they not?" Urchin: "Oh, yes, sir." Bloomer: "And what did they leave you, my little man?" Urchin: "An orphan, sir."

"IN VAIN! In vain!" Those who heard the youth's hopeless cry gathered about him and sought to help him. "In vain! In vain!" he cried again in agonized tones. "What," asked a benevolent stranger, "is in vain?" "The letter V," he cried. Then the crowd moved on in search of a new excitement.

* AN Irishman joined the Metropolitan Police Force. Soon after he had entered the service, he applied to the Chief Inspector for six days' leave of absence. The Chief Inspector refused, saying that he could not be spared so long. Pat was not satisfied, so he made another application, but this time for forty-eight hours' leave of absence. The Inspector granted him this, but to everybody's surprise Pat did not return till six days after. When asked by the Inspector why he had stayed over his time, he replied: "Sir, we work eight hours a day, and six times eight is forty-eight." They let him off.

ONE morning last week, a porter—a droll fellow—at one of the Midland stations, was several times interrupted in the performance of his duties by a little ugly Scotch terrier, which got in his way. At last he gave the cur a kick, which sent him out of the way yelping. Up came the owner of the dog in high dudgeon wanting to know why John had kicked his dog. "Was that your dog?" asked John, with his habitual *sang froid*. "Certainly it was; and what right have you to kick him?" "Why, he's mad," said John. "No, he's not mad, either," said the owner. "Well, I should be," quoth John, "if anybody kicked me in that way."

HER DIARY.—Met him—met him again—in love with him. Met him again—no longer in love with him, but he is in love with me because I am so beautiful. Met him again—he is still in love with me, not only because I am so beautiful, but because I am also so good. Sorry for him. Again I met him—he is colder than he was. Think he has forgotten my beauty and my goodness. I, however, am inclined to think that I am in love with him after all. How lucky he is, and how angry mamma will be. Mamma proved to be strangely pleased. Makes me angry, for I know she is not a good judge of a young girl's heart. Flirted with him outrageously to make mamma angry—didn't succeed. Engaged to him—glad. Married to him—sorry.

HE: "I always pay as I go." She: "Then why tarry? You don't owe me anything."

SHE: "But I thought you were such a good judge of horseflesh?" He: "Don't know as much about it as our cat."

WILLIE: "Pa, what's a fixed star?" Pa (formerly an actor): "A fixed star, I suppose, is one who gets his salary regularly."

AN absent-minded preacher remarked in a eulogy from his pulpit lately that "Death loves a mining shark." Thereupon four stockbrokers and a man with a brother in Colorado got up and left the sacred building.

A BOY in search of a situation entered a cotton factory, and was proceeding down the yard, when he was met by the manager. "What do you want?" asked the manager. "I want work," said the boy. "What can you do?" asked the manager. "Almost anything," was the answer. "Well, you seem to be a very sharp lad," said the manager, "but tell me this, can you file smoke?" "Yes," said the boy, "if you place it in the vice." He got the place.

"Now, boys, I have a few questions to ask you," said a teacher. "Suppose I have a piece of beefsteak, and cut it into sixteen pieces. What would those pieces be?" "Sixteenths," answered one boy, after meditating a moment. "Very good. Now, if I cut the sixteenths in half, what would they be then?" There was silence in the class, but presently a little boy at the foot put up his hand. "Well, Tommy, what is the answer?" "Hash!" answered Tommy confidently.

A MAN once received as a present from a sea captain a fine specimen of the bird which is known as the "laughing jackass." As he was carrying it home he met a brawny Irish navvy, who stopped and said to him: "Phawt kind of burrd is that, sorr?" "That's a laughing jackass," explained the owner genially. The Irishman, thinking he was being made fun of, was equal to the occasion, and responded with a twinkle of the eye: "It's not yerself; it's the bird Oi mane, sorr!"

As my friend was walking down Market Street the other day, he was accosted by a man selling photos in sealed envelopes. Among the names he mentioned were Roberts, Buller, Cronje, De Wet, and others. My friend, thinking he would have De Wet's photo, selected an envelope on which was written the name of De Wet. After breaking the seal, he found, to his surprise, that the envelope was empty. On informing the man of the fact, he examined the returned envelope and then exclaimed: "Well I'll be hanged; he has escaped again!"

Two Irishmen fresh from the Emerald Isle were walking along Strand Road, in Bootle, near Liverpool, when they saw a gang of men removing a very large boiler from a waggon into a large engineers' yard. One of the Irishmen asked the other "what that thing was," pointing to the boiler, the other said he did not know but would go and ask. He thereupon approached one of the men and said: "Will yez plaze till me what that thing is?" alluding to the boiler. The workman, thinking to take a rise out of poor Pat, said in a casual sort of way "Oh, that's a dog kennel," but Pat fairly flabbergasted him by retorting: "Shure an I thought as much when I saw so many puppies round it."

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We regret to have to announce that the special offer by the *Daily Express* of Chambers's Encyclopædia (Twentieth Century Issue) must SHORTLY BE WITHDRAWN.

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The success of the *Daily Express* enterprise proves conclusively two things—that the public is still quick to take advantage of a really good offer, and that the need for such an Encyclopædia as Chambers's—complete, exhaustive, and above all thoroughly up-to-date—has been long and acutely felt. We have from the first made no secret of the fact that our principal aim in undertaking the distribution of this important work was to secure friends for the *Daily Express*, and that we have succeeded in this is evidenced by the thousands of cordial letters of thanks we have received from delighted subscribers all over the kingdom.

In intimating that the offer must shortly be withdrawn, the *Daily Express* feels it its duty to warn hesitating subscribers that if they do not order at once the chances are they will be too late. There are always many easy-going people who put off action till the last possible moment, with the result that frequently they miss opportunities which they regret. In the present instance many will have to be disappointed. If you do not wish to be one of these, write to-day while there is still time.

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THE EDITOR'S PAGE.

There is another complete novel in this number, which occupies the first ten pages of the paper. Surely this, added to several short complete stories and a good instalment of a serial, is by far the biggest pennyworth of fiction that can be obtained. If you would be kind to me, you might whisper the name of *Short Stories* to your friends If you think whispering rude, shout it.

❦❦❦

"L. B. W."—I believe Mr. C. B. Fry used to contribute to the paper you mention, but he does so no longer. The famous Sussex amateur is, however, a contributor to the *Daily Express*. Some intensely interesting cricket notes emanate from his pen and find a place in that paper twice a week, every Monday and Thursday, I think.

❦❦❦

An arithmetical fiend writes as follows: "If twelve persons were to agree to dine together every day, but never sit in exactly the same order round the table, it would take them 13,000,000 years at the rate of one dinner a day, and they would have to eat more than 479,000,000 of dinners, before they could go through all the possible arrangements in which they could place themselves. A has only one change, A B two, A B C six, four letters 24, five 120, six 720, seven 5,040, eight 40,320, nine 362,880, ten 3,628,800, eleven 39,916,800, twelve 479,001,600."

❦❦❦

"Who taught London Bridge?" is the latest samp'e of imbecility that has been sent me in the form of a marked paragraph in a recent number of the *Isis*. With it is a note in writing to the effect that "the honour of teaching London Bridge lies between the Bo Rough and King William's statue!" Why this has been sent to me I cannot understand. I am not aware of having harmed anybody lately.

❦❦❦

"Keldie."—The employment of "mutes" at funerals is fast falling into disuse. There are, however, many old-fashioned people who keep up this custom. These mutes date in usage from the earliest Roman times. According to observers, they usually spend their time when on duty in secular gossip, regaling themselves from time to time from suspicious-looking flasks slyly produced from invisible pockets. When anyone passes by the house they relapse into lugubrious silence, and when anyone enters the house they shed a few judicious tears behind deep black-bordered pocket handkerchiefs. At least, we must imagine they do, because the handkerchiefs go up to their eyes with marionette-like unanimity at intervals. Doubtless Dickens, when he satirized mutes and undertakers in "Martin Chuzzlewit," did much to make the fashion honoured more in the breach than the observance.

❦❦❦

Readers will please note that the grand Whitsuntide number of *Short Stories* will be published on Saturday next, May 25th, instead of on the following Tuesday.

❦❦❦

T. Redwich.—Tyndall, once, when lecturing on electricity, produced the clothes of a man who was taking refuge under a tree when it was struck by lightning. It was a foolish thing, he observed, to go under a tree during an electric storm, unless a person stood some distance from the trunk In this particular case, however, the man's clothes were very wet, and, though they were very much torn, they formed a sufficiently good conductor for the lightning, and he escaped with his life. Had his raiment been dry, he would inevitably have been killed. Producing the man's boots, the lecturer pointed out that the uppers were torn to pieces by the electric fluid in its anxiety to reach the earth, but the sole, into the construction of which iron largely entered, in the shape of hob-nails, formed a good conductor, and was not hurt.

❦❦❦

"Annie Laurie" writes from the sunny south. She has lost both her father and mother, and she and her little brother are alone in the world except for an old aunt. She is engaged to a man whom she loves dearly, but he cannot afford to marry her for at least four years. An old friend of her father's has asked her to marry him, and so provide a comfortable home for her little brother, who is a delicate child. She is greatly perplexed as to what to do, and asks whether I advise her to marry the old man, whom she does not care for, or leave her brother with his aunt, and go out as a nursery governess until her lover can afford to marry her?

Yours is a sad case, "Annie Laurie," but on no account should I advise you to marry an old man whom you do not care for, such unions only end in bitter sorrow. Possibly he would soon tir of your brother, and your sacrifice would have been in vain. Your letters are no trouble, write as often as you like.

❦❦❦

"Traddles."—The biggest tortoise furnishes about sixteen pounds of tortoiseshell. There are three rows of plates on the back, called "blades" by the fishermen. In the central row are five plates, and in each of the others four plates, the latter containing the best material. Besides these there are twenty-five small plates round the edge of the shell known as "feet" or "noses." A beautiful imitation of tortoiseshell is made of cows' horns.

TO CONTRIBUTORS.

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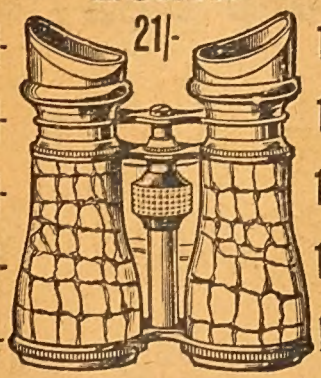

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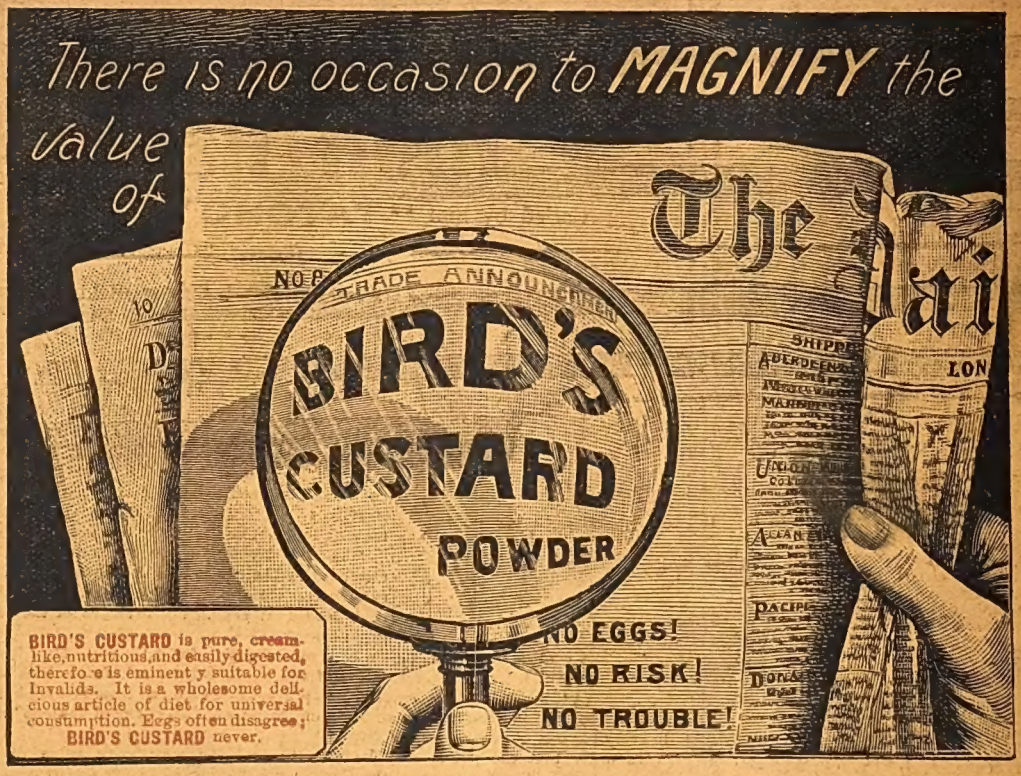
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BIRD'S CUSTARD POWDER
BIRD'S CUSTARD is pure, cream-like, nutritious, and easily digested, therefore is eminently suitable for Invalids. It is a wholesome delicious article of diet for universal consumption. Eggs often disagree; BIRD'S CUSTARD never.
NO EGGS!
NO RISK!
NO TROUBLE!

"ABSOLUTELY PURE, therefore BEST."

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"A PERFECT FOOD."

The Editors of THE LANCET, June 16, 1900, say:—

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